

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE EMPTY GRAVE





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
EMPTY GRAVE**

Jupiter stares stunned at a photo taken by a friend just a few days ago in Venezuela. The woman in the picture is Catherine Jones, who has the same name as Jupiter's mother and looks like her as well. Could it be her? Also, the man she is with has the same name as Jupiter's father, Julius Jones! But his parents have been dead for over ten years! Their plane crashed into the sea off the coast of South America. Did his parents survive the crash? If so, why didn't they contact him? Without wasting time, Jupiter books a flight and lands in Venezuela, and makes his way to a very isolated location—the Diamond City of Suerte.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Empty Grave

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(The Three ???: The Empty Grave)

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1. Rekindling Memories

“Jupe! Mail for you!” Aunt Mathilda’s penetrating voice sounded across the salvage yard and disrupted Jupiter from his work. He was in an old mobile home trailer, squatting on the floor in the middle of a mountain of document folders. It was a huge mess and he was not even sure of how to start to sort those things called folders. Perplexed, he ran his hand through his dark hair and lifted himself up. The mail was more tempting than the chaos he had in front of him.

He left the trailer, which served his friends and him as the headquarters for their detective company, crossed the salvage yard and grabbed the mail that his aunt had put on the stairs of the porch of Jones’s house. It was a telephone bill and a postcard. While reading the postcard, he strolled back to Headquarters. At that moment Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews cycled into the salvage yard. Pete’s sportiness and Bob’s environmental awareness prompted them to increasingly leave their cars at home.

“Hi, Jupe!” cried Pete. “Mail for us? Maybe a new case?”

“Would that be all right with you?” the First Investigator replied. “I thought Kelly’s robbing you of every spare minute.”

“Oh! Well, would I be here then?” Pete quipped.

Bob held back. He knew too well the eternal teasing between the two and he seldom interfered.

“It’s not a new case,” Jupiter continued while his friends parked their bikes, “but a card from Allie.”

“Allie? Not Allie Jamison, is it?” Bob raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, it’s that Allie.”

“She still exists?” Pete said, amazed. “We haven’t heard from her in ages.”

“It doesn’t matter if you ask me.” Bob thought with mixed feelings of the girl with whom they had worked twice in the past, solving exciting cases. Although she was generally nice, there were times when Allie annoyed them with her impetuous and know-it-all mannerisms. “What did she say?”

“Just a few greetings to the three of us,” Jupiter replied. “She’s going to college in San Francisco.”

Pete opened the door to Headquarters and stopped abruptly. Dumbfounded, he stared at the mess he saw in front of him. “What is that?”

“That’s why you should come here today. I didn’t specifically tell you it was about cleaning up,” Jupiter grinned broadly. “Otherwise you would have come up with an excuse.”

“Clean up?” Pete pushed himself past the mountain of files into the trailer. “The day before yesterday, it didn’t look like this. Did you drag all that stuff in here so we could clean it up?”

Jupiter shook his head. “Do you know what this stuff is? They are files and folders that we threw into Tunnel Two some time during an outburst of destructive energy.”

Pete and Bob stared at him, then Bob started laughing.

“Right! I’d already completely forgot about that. We didn’t know where to put the stuff, so we just threw it into the secret passage.”

When The Three Investigators were younger, Tunnel Two was one of several secret passages for them to enter Headquarters. After Uncle Titus gave Jupiter and his friends the old mobile home trailer to use as a club house, over time, the three had piled all sorts of junk around it, hiding it from common view. Later, nobody else remembered that it was there. The three also built several secret entrances to enter the trailer. Now, the trailer has been freed from the junk around it and was no longer hidden. The secret passages remained, but they were seldom used.

Bob became serious again. "But what are you going to do with it now? We still don't have any more storage space." He looked around. Headquarters was full with the desk on one side, the computer, the small sink, the fax machine, the photocopier, the filing cabinet and the laboratory at the back of the trailer. The Three Investigators were happy that they even managed to fit three chairs in.

"That's right. That's why we're gonna put everything in the computer. Why do we even need the paper documents? The information, which is on tons of paper, fits easily on one hard disk or a couple of CDs. If we can do that, we won't have a problem with storage space once and for all. We could even use Tunnel Two again. But before we start keying in the information, we should put all these documents in order. Then it'll be faster later."

Pete sighed. "Do you really want to do it now? It's such a beautiful day today. I have little desire to spend it in this stuffy trailer."

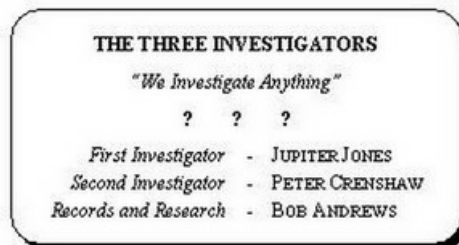
"Why don't you open the door," Jupiter suggested dryly. "Seriously, yesterday was a beautiful day and tomorrow will be a beautiful day. We've been avoiding work for months. Every time we wanted to get started, something came up. Not this time. This time we'll get it done. I've made that my firm intention. Let's go!"

He squatted on the floor, fished for the first folder and leafed through it. Meanwhile, he explained his system to the two of them. Reluctantly, Pete and Bob sat down and searched the mountain of paper for invoices, receipts, case reports, addresses and other material.

Pete rummaged around in a shoebox and pulled out a slip of paper. "Look at this! An ancient handwritten note from Bob about our very first case. Shall we keep this?"

"Sure!" Bob cried. "This piece of paper will certainly have some collector's value and will be exhibited in the first Three Investigators Museum. We'll have to save it. Do we have some place to put sentimental items, Jupe?"

"Maybe we should set it up. I also have something interesting here—one of our first business cards!" He handed them around. On the small cards, which they had made with an old printing press from their open-air workshop at that time. It said:



"It's pretty battered," Bob said. "Back then, we were incredibly proud. Remember how we strutted into Alfred Hitchcock's office and offered him our services?"

"I'll never forget it." Pete laughed. "Jupe really imposed himself."

"And it gave us our first case," Jupiter added confidently.

"Is there anything else in the box, Pete?" Bob wanted to know and took it from Pete's hand. After some searching, he pulled out a silver chain, with a pendant dangling from it.

"The silver spider!" cried Pete. "Mine must be somewhere around, too." The Three Investigators had once received the silver pendants in the form of a spider from a client as a souvenir, but they had never worn them. "It's too bad to let them gather dust."

"You can give it to Kelly," Jupiter suggested.

"A spider of all things! She'll thank me." Pete thought of the many occasions in which he, as a heroic rescuer, had to transport spiders out of Kelly's room because she was so afraid that she didn't even dared to go near them. He had been able to successfully hide the fact from Kelly that he himself had never been particularly comfortable with spiders.

"Are there other treasures in the box?" Jupiter asked.

Bob went on digging and pulled out a bunch of keys. "What's this?"

Jupiter took the keys from Bob for a closer look. Suddenly his face brightened.

"Man! These are Anne's keys from the zoo bombing case. Remember when we forgot to give them back to her? Then we couldn't find her anymore. How did they get into this box?"

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "I guess she'll have a second set of keys by now." He took the box out of Bob's hand and continued to rummage. He found more and more memorabilia from previous cases of The Three Investigators. Sometimes they couldn't remember the details exactly, so Bob looked up the files in which he had neatly documented all of their cases. After two hours there was more chaos at Headquarters than before and not a single sheet of paper had been sorted.

"My goodness! It's five o'clock," Pete shouted, shocked as he looked at his watch. "I promised my mother I'd pick out a new wallpaper for the living room with her today. I'm sorry, guys, but I've gotta go!" He rose.

"And I have a date with Elizabeth," Bob said. "I'm going off as well."

"Hey! We're supposed to tidy up here! You can't just run away like that," Jupiter protested indignantly.

"Tidy up?" Bob laughed. "Have we actually started?"

"We were stuck with old memories," Jupiter said. "That happens, but if we pull ourselves together now, we can still do a lot today."

"No, not today," Pete disagreed. "Tomorrow, okay? Tomorrow we'll start right after school. *Ciao!*" He left Headquarters. Bob followed him.

The First Investigator sighed. "It's always the same. I'm always stuck with the work." He turned his attention again to the mess of paperwork, folders and boxes piled up in front of him. His eyes fell on a small box of photos. Just for a moment, he wrestled with his conscience. Then he gave in, let the disorder be disorder and devoted himself to the photos.

Pete on the beach with his surfboard, Jupiter beside him. He found that he had a rather unfortunate figure standing next to the sporty Second Investigator. His diet had been good, but he still carried a few pounds too much. He quickly put that photo aside.

The next one showed Bob in Los Angeles in front of a poster for the film festival 'The Golden Raven'; followed by one with Jupiter, Bob and Hector Sebastian, with whom they collaborated with many times. Then came one with Pete and his grandfather somewhere in Missouri—that had been taken on their trip to the east coast.

For Jupiter, memories came flooding back. At some point, the photos of Pete and Bob became fewer, but more came those of Aunt Mathilda, Uncle Titus and himself—as a ten-year-old, as an eight-year-old on a swing, at school enrolment... There were many photos and Jupiter didn't even notice how time passed. It slowly got dark outside, but it wasn't until his back began to hurt that he got up and sat down at the desk.

Under the light of the lamp he looked at the remaining photos—those of him and his parents—Julius and Catherine Jones. They had died in a plane crash when Jupiter was still a little boy. He then moved in with his uncle and aunt. He could hardly remember his parents, only a few scenes from his early childhood remained in his memory.

Jupiter looked at the photos with mixed feelings. When he told other people that his parents had died many years ago, they often reacted with strange dismay that he himself could not really understand. Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus were his parents. Julius and Catherine Jones only gave him a few pale memories along with some photos. Nevertheless, when he thought of them, an oppressive feeling crept up on him.

He sometimes wondered what it would be like if his parents hadn't died back then. Probably his life would have been quite different. For better or worse? But did it make any sense to ask this question?

Suddenly, the phone rang and ripped him out of his thoughts. He flinched and needed a moment to find his way around the desk. Then he picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Jupiter? This is Hector Sebastian."

"Mr Sebastian! Nice to hear from you again. I was just thinking about you."

"Really? How do I get the honour?"

"I was looking at some old photos and you were in one of them," Jupiter explained. Mr Sebastian had formerly been a private detective in New York before he wrote his first book. He went on to become a famous crime fiction writer within a very short time. The Three Investigators had dealt with him a few times in the past. "How are you, sir?"

"So far, pretty good. I spent a few weeks in South America researching for a new book. Today I came back. I have a question for you, Jupiter."

"Is it about the new novel?"

"No, something completely different. What are your parents' names, Jupiter?"

The First Investigator was stunned. "You mean Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus?"

"No, I mean your real parents."

"Strange that you should ask. I was just looking at photos of them too. Their names are Julius and Catherine. They died many years ago."

For a moment there was silence at the other end.

Then Hector Sebastian said: "Maybe not."

2. Whisky for Jupiter

“Thank you for your time on such short notice, Worthington.” Jupiter said as he got into the Rolls Royce.

“A business trip for The Three Investigators is always a welcome change for me,” replied the chauffeur, who had been available to the three since the beginning of their detective career.

Worthington worked for the Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency. The Three Investigators had met him a few years ago when Jupiter won the company's competition and received rides in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce for a limited time. Just before this privilege expired, a grateful client from a previous case arranged for them to continue using the service at any time they wished.

Recently, they had rarely used his services, as they had their own driver's licences. But Jupiter didn't have a car and he didn't want to ask Pete or Bob to drive him to Malibu.

“But I suppose this time only one of you needs my services. Or should I pick up Pete and Bob?”

“No, Worthington, I'm your only passenger today.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“To Malibu. Cypress Canyon Drive.”

“A new case, I suppose?”

Jupiter shook his head. “It's a private matter.”

Worthington asked no more questions. That's what Jupiter valued him for. The professional honour of the chauffeur demanded discretion, which he adhered to. If Jupiter did not wish to elaborate on matters, Worthington would respect that. And right now, the First Investigator didn't feel like talking.

A thousand things have been buzzing through his head since Hector Sebastian called him. The writer had suggested that he go to his house instead of discussing the matter over the phone. What could have made him think that Jupiter's parents might not be dead?

It wasn't far to Malibu, but Jupiter thought the journey was endless. He noticed his hands were sweating. Angrily, he called himself to order. Whatever Mr Sebastian had to say to him, everything would have a logical explanation. He shouldn't have to worry unnecessarily.

The road got worse. The asphalt gave way to a gravel road littered with potholes. Jupiter took a look at Worthington, who held the steering wheel in a convulsive manner, as if he feared it could fly away. The chauffeur noticed the curiosity of the First Investigator. “I'll admit that I don't like to drive this car into a neighbourhood like this. The road's a disaster. Good thing it didn't rain.”

“Otherwise the Rolls would soon be pretty battered,” Jupiter admitted.

“But fortunately, the car is in top condition. The potholes won't hurt it.”

“Nice of you to calm me down,” Juve said softly. “Still, I would prefer that we get there soon.”

A few minutes later, Jupiter pointed forward. “Here we are!” The light from a large old house shimmered between some tall trees. The chauffeur drove the car through the driveway and stopped next to Mr Sebastian's car. “I'll wait here.”

“But it might take longer,” Jupiter warned.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m used to waiting. Besides, I have a book with me.”

Jupiter got out, walked up to the door and rang the bell. Hector Sebastian opened. He was a small, grey-haired man with thick eyebrows and a narrow nose. In his hand he held a stick. He’s been limping since an accident many years ago.

“Hello, Mr Sebastian.”

“Good evening, Jupiter. “You hurried, didn’t you?”

“Are you surprised? After what you said on the phone, I had no choice.” They went into the living room with a fire crackling in the fireplace. Jupiter took a seat on a massive old-fashioned leather couch.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thank you, Mr Sebastian,” Jupiter said. “Forgive me for having to be so direct, but I’m not in the mood for small talk right now.”

“I can understand that. All right, I’ll get right on it.” Mr Sebastian said. “As I told you on the phone, I have been in South America for the last few weeks and have been doing research in Venezuela for a new crime novel. I was in a small village near a forest, and lived in a guesthouse where I got to know a nice American couple called Jones.”

Jupiter involuntarily winced.

“They were tourists too. I had a conversation with them over dinner. When I told them I was from California, they told me that they had lived here before. When they told me their last name, it didn’t really strike me because the name ‘Jones’ is very common. But when they talked about a small town near Los Angeles where they used to live, I asked and they said Rocky Beach. From then on there was no doubt to me that they might be relatives of yours.

“I then asked them if they knew a Jupiter Jones. Their reaction was very strange. They mumbled something about not having any relatives. A short time later they just got up and left. They’ve been avoiding me ever since. I’ve watched them a few more times over the next few days. They were pretty nervous. Finally when told them that I was leaving, they seemed relieved.

“During the last few days there, I tried to find out more about them, but didn’t get far. I haven’t even been able to find out where they live now. My time as a private detective is a bit behind as I have been out of practice for a long time.” He smiled a little. “But at least I know their first names—They are Julius and Catherine Jones.”

Jupiter’s stomach contracted. Suddenly he had the feeling of floating weightlessly in space. Desperately, he tried to say something: “Could... maybe I could have a drink after all?”

“Of course. Coke?”

“A whisky.” Jupiter had never drunk whisky before and didn’t know what it tasted like. He didn’t even have a clue why he said that.

Mr Sebastian stared at him in amazement. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

“I think so,” Jupiter replied mechanically.

Hector Sebastian got up and went to the house bar in a corner of the room. A little later he came back with a glass of light brown liquid. Jupiter had a sip—and couldn’t breathe. The whisky burned his throat like fire and Jupiter coughed. For a moment, it took his breath away. Tears shot into his eyes, but then a cosy warmth spread in his belly.

“Are you all right?” Mr Sebastian looked at him worriedly.

Jupiter shook himself. “Yes... Yes, I think so. Disgusting stuff. But at least now I can feel my body again.” Jupiter paused for a while, lost in his thoughts.

“Mr Sebastian,” Jupiter continued. “This must all be a crazy coincidence. My parents have been dead for over ten years.”

“How did they die?”

“In a plane accident.”

“Where was that?”

“Over the sea. Off... off the north coast of...” Jupiter swallowed hard. “... South America.”

“Over the sea,” Hector Sebastian repeated. “Has the wreck ever been recovered?”

Jupiter cleared his throat. His mouth was dry as a desert. “Only partially.”

“And the passengers?”

The First Investigator hesitated. “They have found few bodies. My parents were considered missing. They were finally... declared dead.” Suddenly he got angry and very emotional. “And with a good reason. They’re dead!”

“Jupiter, I’m not saying they’re not. I just thought I should share with you what I found out.”

“Excuse me, Mr Sebastian. You’re right. It’s all just so... so surprising to me.” Jupiter stammered.

They kept quiet for a while. Then Sebastian reached for a paper bag that was on the table. “I have here something else—photos I took of Mrs Jones. Actually, I had many more photos, in which her husband was also there, but the film unfortunately fell into the water on my journey back. Maybe this will help you.” He handed him the photos.

Jupiter’s hand trembled as he received it. The photos showed a woman in her early forties. She had shoulder-length, wavy black hair and a pointed nose. Jupiter looked at all the photos carefully. Then he said, “I can hardly remember my parents. I only have the pictures my uncle gave me. And they’re over ten years old. My mother...” He faltered and looked again at the photos again.

“There is... a certain resemblance... She could be my mother.”

3. The Empty Grave

“It’s seven o’clock. This is Sam Jefferson with the morning news. Los Angeles. The fire disaster on...” Jupiter turned off the clock radio. Seven already? He had fallen asleep only a few hours ago, after he had rolled back and forth restlessly for half the night. He wished he could lay on his bed longer. But sooner or later Aunt Mathilda would wake him up. To avoid curious questions, Jupiter got up voluntarily. He went to the bathroom and showered.

“Good morning!” Aunt Mathilda whistled when Jupiter entered the kitchen.

“Morning.”

“Didn’t sleep well?”

“Hmm.” Jupiter didn’t feel like answering. He really liked his aunt, but her morning cheer was sometimes a little exhausting. She noticed that most of the time and didn’t ask any more questions. Jupiter left the house after only half a roll. He got his bike and went to school.

After a few hundred metres, something stung him hard. Suddenly, he decided to turn left towards Santa Monica. Some of his classmates were cycling in the opposite direction and called out to him, but that didn’t bother him. Unflinching, he rode on towards the coast until he reached the wrought-iron gate of the Rocky Beach cemetery.

He parked the bike and entered the cemetery. No one was there at this time of day. The air was cool and dew shone on the large lawns. But the sun was still just above the horizon and this should promise another warm day.

Jupiter walked along the gravel-scattered paths and let his gaze wander over the many gravestones. He’s rarely been here. Only once a year, on the anniversary of the death of his parents, he came here together with Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda. He had also never understood why people visited the graves of their deceased relatives or friends at the cemetery. If he wanted to think about his parents, he didn’t have to go to the cemetery.

Today was different.

He reached the tombstone with his parents’ names on it. There were some flowers there. It had to be put there by Aunt Mathilda. Jupiter looked at them—red flowers.

Grey stone. Two names. That’s all there was to it. Why was he here?

The grave was empty. They hadn’t found the bodies of most flight passengers after the crash. Nevertheless, there had been a symbolic funeral. Under Jupiter’s feet was nothing but earth. This was a grave without bodies and perhaps even a grave that should not have existed.

Behind him footsteps approached on the gravel path. Jupiter ignored them, but then someone called out.

“Jupe? What are you doing here?”

He turned around. “Lys! I could ask you the same thing.”

“I was just on my way to college and from across the street, I saw you entering the cemetery here.” The blonde girl pointed towards the cemetery gate. It wasn’t far away and her car was on the other side. “Don’t you have to go to school?”

“Don’t you have to go to college now?” Jupiter said a little too sharply.

“No,” Lys replied a little confused. “At least not if you want to tell me something.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

Lys looked at him reproachfully. "So you're saying it's normal to skip school and hang around the cemetery."

"No," Jupiter admitted. "I'm sorry. Do you have time?"

"If it's important, yes. I can skip the first lecture."

"Good. Then come with me. We'll sit on the bench over there. And then I'll tell you what happened to me yesterday."

Jupiter told her about Mr Sebastian's call the day before and his visit to Malibu.

Lys couldn't believe her ears. "But how is that possible?"

"I'd like to know that myself."

"Your parents died more than ten years ago," Lys said. "If they had survived, they wouldn't have just disappeared!"

Jupiter played nervously with the hem of his T-shirt. "I'm sure you're right. But do you believe in coincidence? Okay, I know that the Jones name is common. But the combination of the first names Catherine and Julius has to be rare. And even if there are a dozen couples with the names of Catherine and Julius Jones throughout America, how many would have stayed in Rocky Beach before? And you mustn't forget their strange reaction to Sebastian's question about relatives."

Lys nodded impatiently. "All right. But how do you explain that?"

"I don't know."

"Couldn't it be an unfortunate coincidence?"

Jupiter looked at her looking for help. "Believe me, Lys, no one would like that more than me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If it's not a coincidence and the two are really my parents, I'm faced with a hundred questions I can't answer. Why did they disappear without a trace after the crash? Did they want to get rid of me and the rest of their family? Maybe they faked the accident."

"It's all just speculation," Lys interjected.

"Sure. How did you think I spent last night? I was trying to explain the whole thing logically. If they didn't escape on purpose, then maybe they were running from someone. Or they were being held somewhere against their will. I've already racked my brains and haven't come to a single reasonable possibility."

"You have to try to be logical," Lys said.

"What do you think I'm doing?" Jupiter snapped. Then he remembered, "Sorry. I'm pretty confused right now."

Lys sighed and put her hand on his. "It's really taking a toll on you, isn't it?"

Jupiter bowed his head. "I hate to admit it, but it's true. The worst part is, I can't get any further with logic this time. I'm going around in circles. My logical thinking is completely switched off."

"And this is your weakest point." Lys nodded. "It's bad when suddenly all values and beliefs are questioned."

"That's exactly the point. Yesterday everything was fine and today everything is different. The simple question of whether my parents might still be alive has changed my whole life. Things that were taken for granted before are no longer so. I keep wondering what my life would have been like if my parents hadn't died. I wouldn't have grown up with Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus. Who knows how much that would have changed me?"

"Life with them has shaped me so much that I don't even know who or what I would be without them. This is a rather bitter realization. I'm no longer sure of myself because I don't know how much really came from me in my life and how much was influenced from outside."

What kind of person would I be today if my parents were still alive? I'm afraid of that question. Because it shows me how much everything is influenced by chance. Because a technician at the airline had a bad day, he made a mistake. That's why there was a disaster on the flight to South America. The plane crashed. Many people were killed. And suddenly five-year-old Jupiter Jones stood alone and was taken in by his uncle and aunt. My life took a completely different path possibly because of someone's mistake."

"That's fate," Lys said.

"Or coincidence."

"Is there a difference?"

"Of course. I could settle for a coincidence. But if now, more than ten years later, names and photos appear that suggest that my parents are still alive, it can no longer be a coincidence. Venezuela is far away. Nevertheless I learn about the existence of a married couple with my parents' names. This looks like fate, even if I'd rather deny it. And that scares me."

"Why the fear?"

"Because I feel so exposed. I can't control things anymore. All my life I have held on to logic, but this is suddenly questioned. Fate comes completely unexpectedly to me and I have no chance to avoid it. If all this is destined, what surprises would the future hold for me?"

"I don't believe that everything is destined. After all, you are now free to decide what you want to do," Lys said.

"Free to decide?" Jupiter laughed bitterly. "You're kidding. I'm not free to choose. I only have one choice."

"What's that?"

"I have to go to Venezuela."

"What? When?"

"As soon as possible."

"Why?"

Jupiter looked at her seriously. "Those two are just tourists. They might be gone in a few days. Mr Sebastian hasn't been able to find out where they live in the US. So if I want to know more, I have to leave as soon as possible so I don't miss them."

Lys sighed. "Jupe, you need to consider this very carefully. Making a decision now would be..."

"Exactly right," Jupiter said to her. "I know what you're trying to tell me, Lys. The whole incident happened less than twenty-four hours ago and I should think about it thoroughly. But you have no idea what last night was like for me. I pondered and pondered and pondered and found no answers. Logic cannot solve this problem. I must act if I were to find the solution. And the longer I wait, the more prickly I get."

"I can understand that. But do you have to go to Venezuela? Isn't it enough if you try to contact them by telephone? Or find out more about them first? You're a detective! It shouldn't be a problem for you to find out about them from here."

Jupiter shook his head. "That's not the point. I have the feeling that I must not hesitate another day to find out the truth. And I'll certainly be able to do that faster if I look for them directly."

"Must not hesitate another day?" Lys looked at him, startled. "When are you leaving?"

"As soon as possible. Preferably now." Jupiter laughed. "But I don't think that's going to work. I'm thinking about tomorrow or the day after tomorrow."

"Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow? But you still have school!"

"Bad luck. I can't take that into account now."

“If you just disappear like that, you’ll get into a lot of trouble!”

“Holidays will start in a few days,” Jupiter recalled.

“I’m going to apply to the school for a week’s leave. In special cases, they will make an exception and let you go away earlier. I think this is a special case.”

“Do your friends know about this yet? And Uncle Titus, Aunt Mathilda?”

Jupiter shook his head. “I haven’t spoken to anyone yet. Except with you.” He smiled. “It was good to get rid of all that stuff. Thank you.”

Lys didn’t smile. “I’m worried, Jupiter.”

“Why? Don’t you think I can take good care of myself in Venezuela?”

“You would, but I’ve never seen you so restless before,” Lys said. “Normally, you rotate your thinking machine before you do anything. You’re not a friend of quick decisions. It’s not like you.”

“You may be right about that. But right now, nothing fits anymore. I’m going to Venezuela as soon as possible. And I’m gonna find out if my parents are still alive or not.”

4. A Lonely Decision

“What? Tomorrow?”

“Are you insane?”

“Bob, Pete,” Jupiter said very slowly, “Calm down.”

The three sat at Headquarters around the pile of files that still had not been sorted or cleared away—Jupe on the desk chair, the other two on the floor. Pete and Bob had wondered why Jupiter hadn’t appeared at school, and had turned up at the salvage yard where the First Investigator had been expecting them in the afternoon as agreed. Jupiter told them in detail what had happened. Even his two friends could hardly believe the story. But they were really shocked when Jupiter told them about his plans.

“But you can’t just fly to South America tomorrow! Where are you going to get so much money from,” Pete asked, visually upset.

“From my bank account.”

“But the money...” Bob began.

“It’s actually meant for my studies, I know,” Jupiter said. “But I have to set priorities.”

“How much is the flight?”

“A few hundred dollars.”

“A few hundred dollars? How many are a few?” Pete wanted to know.

“If I tell you this, you’ll just get more upset. You’re worse than Aunt Mathilda.”

“What does she think of that?” Pete asked.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “She doesn’t know anything yet. Neither does Uncle Titus.”

“Oh! And when would you eventually tell them?”

“Not at all. Because they would never let me go.”

“You don’t want to tell them? Are you out of your mind?” Pete stared at him in amazement.

“My father was... is... was Uncle Titus’s brother. If I told him the whole story, he wouldn’t sleep well either. Not to mention Aunt Mathilda. I’d like to spare them that. It’s enough for one in the family to rack his brains.”

Bob laughed. “And you think they’ll sleep more quietly if you just disappear? You can’t possibly be serious.”

“Of course not. But can you imagine what would happen if I told them? I would provoke endless discussions with the two of them. And the discussions I have with myself are quite enough. They wouldn’t let me go, that’s for sure.”

“And rightly so, if you ask me. Flying to South America in such a hurry is an absolutely crazy idea,” Pete exclaimed.

Jupiter made a face. “Crazy idea? If I wait a few more days, the Jones couple may have already left Venezuela and I will never find them again! I can’t take that chance.”

“Do you really think they’re your parents?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know!” Jupiter replied sharply. “That’s why I have to fly there! I actually thought you’d support me. Put yourselves in my shoes for once! Can’t you understand my point of view?”

"Yes, of course!" Pete tried to calm him down. "This whole story is the craziest thing I've ever heard. But that doesn't mean that you should suddenly decide to move there."

"Who's talking about moving there? I'll be gone a few days, that's all."

"And what about school?" Bob asked. "Holidays don't start until the end of this week."

"I was with the director at noon today after my visit to the cemetery and asked him for a week's leave of absence," explained the First Investigator. "But I need the signature of Uncle Titus for that."

"So you'll have to tell him after all," Bob said.

"I can forge his signature."

"Now you're out of your mind," Pete shouted. "That's forgery!"

Jupiter hit the table with his fist. The computer screen trembled and so did Bob and Pete. "I've had enough of this! I have to go to Venezuela, don't you understand that? Last night, fate decided to change my life completely. Am I supposed to stay calm and pretend nothing happened? I am counting on your help, but there is nothing better for you to do than to hinder me. I'm sorry, but it's too late for that. I've already made up my mind and you two can't change it!"

"Our help?" Pete repeated. "What do you mean by that? Are you asking us to come with you?"

"No. This has nothing to do with you. I just thought you could explain everything to Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus when I am gone."

"We?" Pete asked. "You contradict yourself, Jupiter. On the one hand you say that this matter has nothing to do with us, on the other hand, you want us to settle this unpleasant thing with Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus?"

Jupiter became calm again. "Maybe because you're my friends."

"Yes, Juve, but I think you owe it to your aunt and uncle to tell them what it's all about," Bob said calmly.

Jupiter was silent. After a while, he said, "You're right. That'll probably save me a lot of trouble."

"Exactly," Pete agreed.

Bob changed the subject. "What do you actually want to do in Venezuela?"

"Mr Sebastian had described to me where he met the Jones couple. It is located in a small village in the southern rainforest. I'll go there."

"And... if they are really your parents?" Pete asked.

"Then we'll have a lot to talk about."

Jupiter stepped restlessly from one foot to the other. It was the first break at school. The director's secretary watched him suspiciously. She must have thought he'd eaten something wrong. Her looks made him nervous. His hands restlessly rolled the form he had filled out into an ever thinning tube.

The door to the director's office opened and someone else came out. The secretary then waved to Jupiter to go in.

"Good morning, Mr Amos," Jupiter said.

"Hello, Jupiter. Have a seat. Have you filled out the application yet?"

Jupiter nodded and took a seat. "Yes, and my uncle has signed it." He put the form on the director's desk. It had suffered a lot. He quickly stroked it smooth and waited for Mr Amos to read it.

"A family affair, huh?" muttered the director. "So, couldn't you be more specific?"

Jupiter shook his head. "It's something... something very personal."

Mr Amos sighed. "Very well. I'm usually not that generous when it comes to leave. But since you're one of the best at school, it won't do you any harm to miss the last week of classes before the holidays. And since your uncle agreed," he took a look at the signature, "everything should be fine."

"I assure you," Jupiter said, trying to smile.

"You entered today's date for the start of the leave," Mr Amos noted. "Was that intentional?"

"Yes. I'd like to go home now."

"Fine. I hope the matter will be resolved by the time classes start again in a few weeks."

"I hope so too," Jupiter said, getting up and saying goodbye. "Have a nice holiday, Mr Amos."

"Likewise, Jupiter."

When he left the office, he breathed a sigh of relief. His hand trembled. Was it because of the tension that was slowly decreasing or was it the whole morning it took him to practise Uncle Titus's signature?

He looked at his watch. He couldn't afford a break because there was a lot to do.

Bob hadn't closed the front door yet, when his mother called for him. "Bob! Is that you?"

"Yes, Mum. What is it?"

His mother came into the hallway. "Mrs Jones just called. She asked that you drop by at the salvage yard right away. She sounded very excited. You'd better go now. Did something happen?"

Bob stared at her. "I... I don't know," he stuttered. "I hope not. Did she say anything else?"

"No. Except that it's urgent and she wants to call the Crenshaws."

"Good. Then I'll go right away." Bob threw his school bag in the hallway and turned to the door.

"Hey! What about lunch?"

"Not today. Sorry, Mum!" He ran out to his bicycle, got onto the saddle and rode towards the salvage yard. Completely out of breath when he arrived, he saw that Pete's bike was already there. Bob wondered if he should go to Headquarters first, but a bad feeling crept up on him and he decided to go straight to the Jones's house.

Aunt Mathilda opened the door for him. "Bob! I'm glad you're here. Do you know anything? Did Jupiter tell you anything?"

"Hello, Mrs Jones. What happened?" Bob asked.

Pete came out of the living room into the hallway, followed by Lys. "Hi Bob! Jupiter is gone!"

"What? Gone? Are you sure?"

"Here!" The Second Investigator held out a note to him. "Read it yourself..."

The note was written in Jupiter's somewhat spidery handwriting:

Dear Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus.

Don't be surprised if I don't come home today. Unfortunately, I had to leave on short notice. I know I should have told you, and I know I'm being unfair to you. But any explanation would have unnecessarily complicated the whole issue and cost time that I

don't have. Bob and Pete know what this is about. They can give you the details. I'll get back to you as soon as I arrive (probably tonight). Please don't be angry with me.

Jupiter

5. Aunt Mathilda is Furious

The two investigators and Lys spent the whole afternoon with the Jones. After the first shock, they had called Los Angeles Airport and learned that a plane took off for Venezuela at 10:00 am in the morning. So the hope of being able to intercept Jupiter was dashed. Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus were in total disarray. Pete and Bob told them in detail what they knew about Mr Sebastian's story and Jupiter's plans. The two of them couldn't believe their ears.

While Uncle Titus became more and more silent, Aunt Mathilda became more and more upset. She walked up and down the living room like a caged animal, desperately trying to get rid of her energies. "This can't be true," she kept mumbling. "This can't be happening."

"My brother and his wife have been dead for twelve years," Uncle Titus said once again. "If only the boy had talked to me, I could have made that perfectly clear to him."

"How can you be so sure they're dead?" Pete asked carefully.

"The plane crashed... a hundred kilometres off the coast! No one could have swum ashore. And even if my brother and sister-in-law had managed to do that, they would hardly have run away on the quiet."

"They might have been held somewhere," Lys said. "But Mr Sebastian said that they were tourists, so it does not seem that they are being held somewhere or by someone."

"Then they or someone else would have contacted me," Uncle Titus said. "Or they wouldn't be in Venezuela right now."

Lys nodded. "Jupe has considered another possibility. He said that..." she cast an uncertain glance across to Mr Jones, "that his parents might have deliberately disappeared for some reason."

Mathilda Jones said: "That comes from his never-ending detective game! This constant distrust! Jupe probably believes that his parents' family responsibilities have become too much and that they have simply emigrated. That's absurd! Can't he just do something normal for once? If you all weren't constantly chasing criminals, my boy might still be here." She nervously drove through her hair and continued her walk around the room.

"Mathilda," Titus Jones reassured her. "It's not the boys' fault." He turned to his guests and said: "Jupe hardly knew his parents. That's why his imagination runs away. But I know my brother. He never would have let his family down. He's dead, it's as simple as that."

"What upsets me most is that the boy didn't say anything!" Aunt Mathilda exclaimed. "He could have talked to us!"

"Don't blame yourself, Mrs Jones," Lys said. "It was definitely not a lack of trust in you. Jupe just wanted to save you some trouble."

"I think you misunderstood me, Lys. I am not blaming myself, I am blaming him! Not because he skipped school and left. That annoys me too, but Jupiter is very independent. He knows what he's doing. I'm sure he's given it a lot of thought and is aware of the consequences. No, I blame him because he is giving you the task of telling us everything. That's what disappoints me the most. I didn't think he was that cowardly."

Lys took a quick look at Pete and Bob. They hadn't expected such an outbreak of anger.

"Okay, as it is now, we cannot do anything except to wait and see if Jupe calls from Venezuela," Bob said. "The airline had said that the plane should reach Caracas at about 7:00

pm our time, if there are no delays.”

“That is about three hours from now,” Pete said. “Perhaps Bob, Lys and I could go home first and we’ll come back later to wait for his call.” Strictly speaking, Pete wanted to leave Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus alone for a while, hoping that they would calm down.

At about 6:45 pm, the three went back to the Jones’s house. Aunt Mathilda had calmed down a lot, but signs of anxiety were still there. Uncle Titus was quiet as usual. The three sat around the living room, looking at each other helplessly.

Then the phone rang. Aunt Mathilda ran into the hallway. The others followed her.

“Yes? Jupe? Jupe! Thank goodness! Where are you? And why... Yes... Yes... And when will you be back? ... How are you gonna to get there? ... Do you have enough money? ... Yes... Yes... They’re all here... I will... Take care! ... Jupe?” She hung up. “That was Jupiter. He’s at the Caracas airport now and he’s fine.” Aunt Mathilda breathed a sigh of relief. Bob and Pete realized that their anger earlier was just to cover up their worries. Now the façade was crumbling.

“What else did he say?” Lys asked excitedly.

“That tomorrow morning, he will fly to... What was the name of the place? Kanama or something.”

“Canaima?” Bob was already leafing through an atlas.

“Yeah, right. He wants to spend the night there and travel further south tomorrow. He said he probably won’t be calling again. Telephoning from Venezuela is a disaster and it took him some time for the line to connect. Otherwise, he’s fine, and he sends his regards to all of you.”

“At least something,” Pete remarked. “Hopefully he’ll be fine without us there.”

It was raining. The dense cloud cover blocked the view of the land below. The monotonous grey clouds had a soporific effect on Jupiter. No wonder, it had been a busy day. He felt as if the visit to his director had been at least three days ago.

The evening before, he had called Hector Sebastian to get the exact address and directions for his destination. He checked with the airport on the available flights, and then called the airline to enquire. He was put on a wait list for a 10:00 am flight the next morning. That meant that he had to wait for a seat to become available before getting on the flight. This was the best option he had on such short notice. He then packed and placed his luggage at Headquarters.

Early in the morning, Worthington picked him up and drove to the airport in Los Angeles after a detour to the bank where he had withdrawn some money.

At the airport, Jupiter went straight to the airline counter to check on his wait list status. Lucky for him, a short while later, someone had jumped off and he had got his seat after he paid. He quickly got a travel guide before his plane took off for the southeast promptly at 10:00 am.

He flew towards the sun, crossed some time zones and so it was shortly before midnight Venezuelan time when he reached Little Venice—that was what Venezuela meant when translated. The first Spanish immigrants called the land that because the natives had built their huts on wooden piles in the water.

From the capital city Caracas, Jupiter called home. He spent the following hours at the airport, because the next morning a flight should go to Canaima. It didn’t annoy him that he couldn’t see Caracas while he was there, because he had an urgent matter to attend to. Also, his tiredness was too great, so he had to rest before flying further south. The flight was

surprisingly cheap. For the six hundred kilometres to Canaima he had paid only forty-three dollars. This calmed Jupiter, who had initially worried about his travel budget.

Now he was sitting in a small passenger plane and flew through a dense cloud field. He hadn't slept well in thirty hours. All he wanted now was a bed. But then something happened that suddenly made him wide awake. The cloud cover tore open and beneath it was a breathtaking landscape with mountains covered with dark greenery as far as the eye could see. Endless chains of hills stretched like the waves of a frozen sea to the horizon. Deep gorges hid narrow rivers in their shadows. Everything was covered with lush greenery, from which the rain that had just fallen rose again as steam. The sun and the cloud fields cast a spotted carpet of light at the landscape, which slowly glided over the mountains.

Suddenly a plateau slid into Jupiter's field of vision, which seemed to be only a few metres below him. He flinched in shock. How could the plane have suddenly lost altitude? Then he realized that the plane was flying over a table mountain. A few moments later, the landscape plunged back into its original depth.

Jupiter enjoyed the sight. So that was the tropical rainforest. Photos or pictures from television could not be compared with reality. After a while, the plane went on to land, and in the distance, Jupiter spotted a cluster of houses. There was an announcement over the loudspeaker. Jupiter's knowledge of Spanish was not overwhelming, but it was sufficient to understand that the passengers should look to the right. Another table mountain rose on the horizon and by a lucky coincidence the view in this direction was just so clear that Jupiter could catch a glimpse of the *Salto Ángel* or Angel Falls—the world's highest uninterrupted waterfall. A narrow, glittering band plunged almost a thousand metres into the depths there. The sun painted a rainbow onto the spraying water. But after a few moments the plane sank so low that the surrounding hills blocked the view of the waterfall.

Jupiter looked down at Canaima again. A wide red stripe led out of the city. He thought it was a road, but suddenly it ended in the impenetrable green of the jungle. When the plane turned a loop and the strip finally lay right in front of them, Jupiter realized that this was the runway. There was no asphalt and no lighting typical of an airport, but it seemed to work here. Jupiter shrugged. Why not?

The landing was a little bumpy, but Jupiter had imagined it worse. After receiving his luggage, he left the tiny airfield and made his way to Canaima. On a bumpy gravel road there were many off-road vehicles with their drivers. Jupiter made it clear to one of the drivers in broken Spanish that he did not want to book jungle tours or move into the beautiful hotel with the swimming pool, but was just looking for a cheap place to stay overnight. Half an hour later he threw his travel bag into the corner of a very small and spartanly furnished but clean guesthouse room and took a shower. Even though his stomach was growling, he didn't eat at the restaurant. He went over the rest of his provisions, went to bed and almost instantly fell asleep.

"I wonder what Jupiter is doing now." Pete looked around helplessly in the desolate Headquarters.

"Probably asleep," Bob replied. They had met at the salvage yard after school out of old habit. But without Juve, this place seemed strange to them. "And what do we do now?"

Pete sighed and drove his hands through his red-brown hair. "We could clean up this mess—a little surprise for Jupiter when he gets back. But without his organizational talent, we'll probably just bring more disorder into it."

"All lame excuses."

“Right,” Pete admitted. “Actually, I don’t feel like cleaning up. But not because I’m lazy, but because I’m worried that we deal with files here while Jupe is somewhere in Venezuela and could be in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble are you thinking of?” Bob asked.

“What do I know! He could get lost in the jungle or get bitten by snakes or something. Without us, he’s completely stuck!”

Bob laughed. “Don’t you think Jupe can take good care of himself?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. How many times have we had to bail him out? I stopped counting at some point.”

“And what do you want to do? Fly there and go after him?”

“I’d love to. But neither my wallet nor my school grades allow that. I’m sure the director won’t grant me leave of absence.”

Bob was thinking. “If Jupiter hadn’t been completely off his game, he would have acted differently. He never acts hastily. He prefers to think things over a hundred times before putting them into action. Only this time, his logic failed him.”

Pete nodded. “I can well understand that his logic failed in this case. I might have done it differently.”

“What logic would have worked for you?” Bob asked with a grin.

Pete passed the point. “What are you getting at?”

“I’m just wondering what Jupiter would normally do in a case like this,” Bob said. “He certainly wouldn’t have flown to South America immediately. And what else would he have done?”

“He would have done some research from here,” Pete replied.

“Exactly,” Bob exclaimed. “If we want to help him, we should do the same.”

“But how are we going to find out if Jupiter’s parents are still alive?” Pete asked.

Bob shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. But I suggest we visit Hector Sebastian.”

Pete frowned. “What’s the point?”

“I don’t know yet. But we have to start somewhere.”

“Jupiter’s reasoning is usually more plausible,” the Second Investigator said.

“Don’t complain, come with me,” Bob said. “Or would you rather clean this place up?”

Pete took a look at the mountain of paper and then he pushed his way out past Bob.

6. Lost in the Wild

“But I can’t afford a guide,” Jupiter exclaimed. “*¡No guía!*”

The Venezuelan spoke so quickly that the First Investigator couldn’t understand a single word. He learned Spanish at school, but the dialect spoken here had nothing to do with what he had learned in school. The little man kept talking to him.

“*¡No tan rápido, por favor!*” It didn’t help.

The man didn’t speak any slower. Jupiter shook his head decisively. “*¡No, no!*” He pointed to the Jeep parked next to them. “This is a rental car. *Coche de alquiler*. I have a driver’s licence. Uh...” Jupiter desperately wondered how to say ‘driver’s licence’ in Spanish. For simplicity’s sake, he finally pulled it out of his wallet and waved it around in front of the car rental employee’s nose. But it didn’t seem to bother him at all.

As much as Jupiter had understood so far, it was about the man not wanting to rent him a car without a guide. They say it’s because the roads are too bad. The First Investigator thought it was a foregone conclusion. Whether or not he was able to drive a car, he didn’t need a guide. The map he got in the village would be enough.

“*¡No guía!*” he repeated tiredly. “*¿Cuánto es?*”

Suddenly the man became aware. “Aha,” Jupiter thought. “When I talk about money, things look different.”

The man ran into his little hut and a short time later came out with a form and held it out to Jupiter. ‘*Seguro*’ was written on it. Jupiter pulled out his travel guide and looked it up in the word guide. “Insurance, aha,” he murmured. “So you want me to take out extra insurance for the car.” He glanced at the bottom of the page, where the price was. “Acceptable,” he said. “All right. *De acuerdo*.”

The car rental employee went off again. Shortly before reaching his hut he turned around and waved Jupiter to go with him. The First Investigator followed him. In the small office he filled up some papers, which fortunately were made out in Spanish and English. But as soon as the man had taken a look, he shook his head. “*¡No, no! ¿Diecisiete? ¡Sola-mente a partir de veintiuno!*”

“*¿Veintiuno?* You mean I have to be twenty-one to rent a car?” Jupiter hit his forehead. He got up, annoyed. Furiously he took the ball-point pen, crossed out his age specification and put it up by five years.

The man shook his head in an uproar. “*¡No, no, no!*”

“Is there a problem?” a voice asked behind Jupiter so he turned around. There stood a young man with long hair and glasses and looked at them calmly. He was tall and sloppy and wore a loose and stained T-shirt.

“Do you speak Spanish?” Jupiter asked.

He nodded.

“Can you explain to this this man that I need a rental car even if I’m not twenty-one?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders. “It won’t do much good,” he said. “He will not allow it. What do you need the car for?”

“I must go to Suerte.” Jupiter said. “I understand that I can only get there by car.”

“That’s why I’m here.” The man grinned. “I want to go to Suerte too.”

“Do you have a driver’s licence and is over twenty-one?”

“Exactly twenty-one. But that’s enough.”

Jupiter had hope. “When do you want to go there?”

“Today.”

“Can you give me a lift?”

He grinned again. “If we split the cost of the rental.”

“No problem.”

“¿Problema?” the employee interfered. Now the newcomer spoke to him. Five minutes later, he triumphantly held the key to the rental car in front of Jupiter’s nose. “*No problema*,” he quipped.

“We’re going to Suerte together, and we don’t know anything about each other yet. Not even our names. I’m Jason. Or J.J. The second J stands for Jackson. Isn’t that a stupid name? Jason Jackson! How can parents call their child that!”

Jupiter laughed. “It can’t be a coincidence that we met. I’m also a J.J.—Jupiter Jones.”

“This is really no coincidence! You needed someone who could rent a car, and I was looking for someone who could share the cost with me—because I’m short of cash.”

“Me too.”

They had already left Canaima. Their destination was the southern town Hector Sebastian had visited. It was also called the Diamond City because there were many diamond mines nearby. According to the map, the place was about a hundred kilometres south of Canaima. They were expecting to reach there in the afternoon. At the moment they were on an extremely bumpy road that led through the middle of the jungle. Huge trees appeared on both sides of the road. They could only see a few metres into the jungle, after that it was darkness. Apart from theirs, not a single car was seen and it didn’t look as if the road was used frequently. Jupiter was driving.

“What are you going to do in Suerte?” J.J. wanted to know.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders indifferently. “Vacation.”

“All alone?”

“So are you.” Jupiter evaded answering the question. “Or are you not on vacation?”

“Yes, I am,” J.J. replied. “I’m afraid I didn’t find anyone who wanted to come with me. I’ve been on the road for over a month.”

“Where have you been?”

“I’ve travelled across South America once,” said J.J. “This is really a great continent. Unfortunately, I’m running out of money. You came in at the right time.”

“And what do you want to—” Jupiter drove into a deep pothole and hit his head on the roof of the car. “Ouch! What do you want to do in Suerte?”

J.J. grinned. “Look around. Otherwise I already see most places.”

After a few kilometres the road became so narrow that it could no longer be described as a road. Again and again they bumped through deep potholes in which the water of the last tropical downpour still stood. The air was unpleasantly hot and humid. And the wall of trees piling up to the side slowly came closer and closer. They drove about half an hour until the sun disappeared behind a dense cloud cover. Soon afterwards the first drops of rain fell and within a few moments it poured freely.

The windshield wiper could hardly cope with the crashing rain. Visibility was very poor. Jupiter hoped that the view would be sufficient, at least there was no traffic. A moment later he drove into such a deep pothole that the floor of the car dragged over the mud path, the

travel bags fell from the back seat and Jupiter hit his head again. “Damn!” the First Investigator yelled at the rain, but it wouldn’t stop. Frustrated, Jupiter stopped the car. “We’d better wait till the rain stops, huh?”

“All right. Tropical rain is heavy, but it doesn’t usually last very long.”

“Are the roads everywhere like this?” Jupiter asked.

“In remote areas, yes,” J.J. replied. “I’ve got used to it.”

After Jupiter had turned off the engine, all they could hear was the crackling drops. “Only the car separates us from the pouring rain, poisonous snakes and other dangers of which we have no idea.”

“Scorpions. One stung me two weeks ago. That was pretty awkward.”

“Give me courage.” Jupiter reached back and rummaged restlessly in his pocket. He brought out a sandwich that he had bought in Canaima. Slowly chewing, he stared out into the falling mass of water.

After half an hour, the rain subsided and they decided to go on. But the water had softened the road and turned it into a mud track. Flat puddles were indistinguishable from deep holes and more than once Jupiter was afraid the axle might break when the car crashed into a deep pothole again.

“Now I know why I had to take out extra insurance,” he muttered. Steam rose from the jungle and blew across the road, visibility was still poor. The car crawled fifteen miles along the muddy path. “We’ll need days of driving. Don’t you even want to drive?”

J.J. shook his head. “You’re actually doing pretty well. At least for an inexperienced jungle traveller.”

Suddenly there was a tree in the middle of the way. It had not fallen, but grew out of the ground right in front of them. Jupiter stepped on the brake. “What’s that? Where’s the road gone?”

“Away,” J.J. said dryly.

“It can’t be.” Jupiter got out—and sank his ankles into the mud. “Damn it! What is this tree doing here?” On closer inspection, he found that the road actually ended there. It was replaced by the jungle.

Jupiter grabbed the map. “I must have missed a turn-off.” He climbed back into the car and wanted to turn, but the wheels of the Jeep had already dug deep into the wet earth and went crazy. “Please don’t!” He broke out in a sweat.

“Take it easy. We’re in no hurry, are we?”

“I still want to get out of here!” Jupiter stepped on the accelerator very carefully. The tyres were not allowed to spin too fast to grip. Slowly they pushed themselves out of the mud until they were free with a jerk. As carefully and quickly as possible he turned around and drove back.

“According to the map, the turn-off is no more than one kilometre away,” J.J. noted.

Jupiter drove three kilometres, but all they discovered was a narrow path leading to the middle of the undergrowth. It was just wide enough for a car, but hardly suitable to actually drive on it. They searched the route again, but there was no doubt—that had to be the road marked on the map. “This is not even a road,” cursed Jupiter. “It’s not even a way!”

“I’m afraid we have choice but just to go on,” J.J. said.

Jupiter looked at his passenger. He was glad he was not alone. Jason radiated the calm he was lacking. “You’re right.” He resolutely steered the vehicle straight into the rainforest. A thicket of lianas and branches scraped the roof of the car. Roots and puddles set mean traps for the wheels. One pothole followed another, they were constantly shaken, worse than the

most violent earthquake Jupiter had ever experienced—and he had already experienced many in California.

Jupiter strained to concentrate on the wilderness ahead. A fallen tree hung threateningly close above the car, but it was still enough to drive underneath. A shallow river suddenly appeared. The stream, probably a branch of the Río Caroní, crossed its way. Jupiter stepped on the brake. “This is not a road,” he yelled. “This is an adventure playground! Am I in a Jeep commercial or what?”

J.J. smiled. “I can only repeat myself—keep calm. We have no choice if we want to go to Suerte.”

Jupiter grinned in agony. “All right.” While he was accelerating, he prayed to all the gods of the jungle that the water should really be as shallow as it looked. The wheels immediately disappeared into the brown broth and water seeped through the door gap into the interior of the car. But after a few metres they made it. The car rolled up the other bank. “Thank the gods!”

A few hundred metres further they had less luck. The Jeep bumped over a high root and the front wheels fell into a deep, muddy hole in the ground. They were stuck. Jupiter slowly accelerated, but here the four-wheel drive didn’t help him. The front wheels didn’t move, and the rear wheels slowly dug deeper and deeper into the mud. “Now what?”

J.J. raised his hand soothingly. “I’ll check it out.” He got out and climbed carefully around the car. But after a few moments he came back.

“How’s it looking?”

“No good. We’d have to lift the car to free it, and we might not be able to do this together. Try the engine again.”

This time Jupiter gave full throttle, however, apart from a shrill roar of the engine, it did nothing at all. They both got out and started shovelling at the front wheels with their hands. But the more earth they moved, the deeper the Jeep slipped in. Jupiter had mud all over his body and the sweat was pouring out. Exhausted, he leaned against the hot hood. Then he hit it angrily. “This is not a road,” he screamed, and some birds flew up somewhere in shock.

Suddenly he noticed how loud it was around him. The jungle was full of life. Birds and other living creatures made eerie noises. He looked around. Everywhere, something seemed to rustle and scurry. Close to him, a small green snake wrapped itself around a branch and stared down at him.

“Don’t panic,” said J.J. who noticed Jupiter’s anxious look. “It’s not poisonous.”

“Should we still get back in the car?”

Without waiting for an answer, Jupiter climbed back behind the wheel. Jason followed him. “What do we do now?” asked the First Investigator downheartedly. “We are stranded in the middle of a tropical rainforest, lost in the wilderness.

“We’re already over twenty miles from Canaima. It’d take us a whole day on foot to get back. And it’ll be dark in a few hours. There’s no way we can risk hiking at night. Especially not when we are surrounded by a whole bunch of snakes, spiders and scorpions. I can imagine funnier things than walking through the jungle at night. Is there a settlement around here?”

J.J. took a look at the map and shook his head. His composure had disappeared.

“And what does an experienced South American traveller like you do in a situation like this?”

Jason grinned wryly. “Despair?”

7. Encounter in the Jungle

“We spent the whole afternoon with Mr Sebastian,” Pete summed up, “but it didn’t help. What do you suggest we do now?”

Bob shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I was actually hoping he could give us more information. But whatever he told us, we’ve got it from Jupe earlier. Well, at least now we have prints of Mrs Jones’s photos.”

“Should we show them to Uncle Titus?” Pete asked. “I’m sure he remembers her better than Jupe.”

Bob frowned. “I don’t know. Yesterday, Uncle Titus was pretty nervous. I’m not sure it’s good for him to see the photos.”

“That’s right, but do we have a choice?” Pete said. “I don’t know what else we could do.”

Bob tilted his head and finally nodded. “All right. But we should proceed with caution.”

They found Titus Jones at the salvage yard. He was just sorting out a bunch of screws that had accumulated over time.

“Mr Jones?” Bob said.

“Oh, you’re here?” Uncle Titus was clearly nervous. “Were you in your trailer? Have you heard from Jupe?”

“No,” Bob replied. “But we were with Mr Sebastian. Unfortunately, he couldn’t tell us much. He told us the place that Jupe would probably visit—a village in the middle of the Venezuelan jungle.”

Uncle Titus looked up in surprise. “You don’t want to go after him, do you?”

Pete shook his head. “But we want to help him as best as we can from here. Maybe we can do some checking to find out if his parents are still alive.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Mr Sebastian gave us some photos he took of Mrs Jones in Venezuela. Maybe you can tell us if you recognize the woman in these photos.” He handed him the photos.

Uncle Titus looked at the photos for a long time. Then he shook his head slowly. “I don’t know.”

“You mean she looks like her, but you’re not sure?” Bob asked.

“No. I mean, I don’t know if it could be Catherine Jones or not.”

“Try to imagine the woman you remember twelve years older,” Pete suggested.

“I can’t do that. I hardly remember her.”

Pete frowned. “But... but she was your brother’s wife.”

“Right.”

“Don’t you remember your brother either?” Bob asked.

Uncle Titus nodded. “Yes. I remember him well.”

“Then how come you cannot remember what his wife looked like?”

His answer was unexpected and sharp. “Just because Catherine happened to be my brother’s wife doesn’t mean I can remember her!”

Pete and Bob were speechless. They looked at each other for help. As suddenly as the outbreak had come, Uncle Titus calmed down.

Titus Jones then became as quiet as usual. "Sorry. There are some things you don't know about."

"About what?" Pete asked carefully.

Uncle Titus sighed. "Catherine and I never got along very well... No, that's too carefully put. We couldn't stand each other. There were always arguments at family gatherings. At some point the situation got worse and we had no contact at all.

"Mathilda and I only saw Julius and Jupiter when they visited us. Catherine stayed away. So it's actually been more than twelve years since I last saw her. And I have to confess, I never wanted to remember her face. I'm sorry, guys, but I can't help you."

"Well," Pete said, "Let's go again."

They turned around and went back to Headquarters. When they closed the door behind them, the Second Investigator sighed. "Whew! I didn't expect that."

Bob shook his head. "Neither did I. My goodness, did you know that Uncle Titus can get so angry?"

"Did you even know he's capable of not liking another person? I'd always thought there weren't any such stories in Jupe's family."

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "I guess there's one in every family. Why should Jupe's be any different?"

"Especially with Uncle Titus!"

"We shouldn't judge anyone," Bob said. "And maybe we should stay out of it. I don't want to get involved in a family feud that doesn't concern me."

Pete shook his head. "I'm uncomfortable too, but Jupe needs our help. We have to move on! Did Jupe know that his uncle couldn't stand his mother?"

"I don't know. It's possible. Maybe that's why he disappeared without saying anything to Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda."

"So what do we do now? Neither Hector Sebastian nor Uncle Titus have been able to help us." Bob sighed. "I don't know. Jupe would know what to do."

The constant singing and humming of the jungle seemed to have become louder. The rain had almost stopped, but water was still dripping from the trees onto the roof of the car. Jupiter stared into the impenetrable green. Slowly he pinched his lower lip as he thought hard.

"This is actually a road, even if I didn't see it as one," he said. "This path does not happen to lead through the wilderness. It has been artificially created, as you can see from the tree stumps that are all around here. No one would build a road through the middle of the jungle without using it. So sooner or later, somebody's gotta come by."

J.J. nodded chewing something. He had just raided Jupiter's food supplies. "I'm sure you're right. But when is sooner or later?"

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. In a few days at the latest."

"No problem at all. We've got plenty to eat."

"I had brought enough to eat," Jupiter corrected, casting a sceptical glance into an empty bag. "Anyway, I thought I had enough."

"I asked you if I could take something," Jason defended himself.

"You can. I have to lose weight anyway." He stroked his somewhat-full stomach.

"Besides, I'm glad I'm not stuck here alone. I'd be happy to sacrifice a few chocolate bars for that."

Suddenly the sounds of the rainforest mixed with some loud engine sounds. Jupiter raised his hand and listened hard. Was that a car? Or a plane? A few moments later there was no

doubt—a car was approaching!

Jupiter opened the door and ran back a bit to warn the driver. He didn't want an accident to happen because the driver saw the Jeep too late. J.J. followed him.

Slowly and loudly an off-road vehicle came towards them. Jupiter waved. The car stopped a few metres in front of them. A roundish bald man got out and came up to Jupiter.

"Tenemos un problema aquí," said the First Investigator. *"¿Puede empujar el auto, por favor?"*

"Are you Americans?" the man replied in clear English to Jupiter's amazement.

Jupiter nodded with relief. "Yes. We got stuck with our rental car. We've been waiting for help for hours."

"Well, you're lucky I'm driving by here today. This way is almost never used."

"We can see that," J.J. said calmly.

The man had now come all the way up. He wore a khaki-coloured, wrinkled pair of trousers and a wide T-shirt with two large dark sweat stains under his armpits. His light skin immediately showed that he was not South American. "How did this happen?" he asked.

Jupiter shrugged. "I don't know. I got into this hole and was stuck."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To Suerte," Jupe replied.

"Haven't they told you how dangerous it is to drive through the jungle without a guide?"

J.J. nodded. "Yes. But we couldn't afford a guide."

The bald guy walked round the rental car and took at the tyres. He grinned. "Like I said, you're lucky. I think we can get the car free. And then we can go together. I want to go to Suerte, too."

"Really? That'd be great!" Jupiter felt a stone dropped from his heart.

Together they looked at the Jeep again. "It's pretty deep," the man said. "This is going to be difficult."

"Could you try pulling it out?" Jupiter suggested.

"I have to drive in front of the Jeep to do that. The road's barely wide enough to get past." The man thoughtfully tapped his lips with his index finger.

Finally he shrugged. "We'll have to try." He went back to his car and carefully steered it past the stranded vehicle. On the other side stood a thick tree and there was only a few centimetres of space between the car and the tree trunk. Then the car stopped abruptly. "Damn!" shouted the driver. "My side mirror is in the way."

"Then how?" Jupe asked.

"I have to detach it." He pulled out a toolbox under the seat and put his plan into action. The few centimetres gained were sufficient to overcome the obstacle. While he was reattaching the mirror, J.J. tied a tow rope to the Jeep's towbar and connected it to the other car. The man started slowly, the rope tightened and the Jeep groaned and creaked. It looked as if it would not work, but then it was pulled out of the hole with a jerk and stood a few metres on safe ground.

"You did it!" Jupiter shouted. "Thank you very much!"

"And now you're just gonna follow me around. I know this route by heart."

"Do you live in Suerte?" J.J. wanted to know.

The man shook his head. "Nope, but a few friends of mine do. I visit them often." Suddenly he laughed. "Now I've pulled you out of the mud hole and I haven't even introduced myself. My name is Jones... Julius Jones."

8. The Diamond City

He reached out his hand to Jupiter. The First Investigator stared at him and couldn't get a word out. Hesitantly, Jupiter reached out and shook Mr Jones's hand. The hand was flesh and blood. He was not a ghost.

"I'm... Pete Crenshaw," stuttered Jupiter.

J.J. turned and gave Jupiter a stunned look. But before he could ask the treacherous question, Mr Jones held out his hand to J.J.

"Jason Jackson," J.J. said mechanically. "We have the same initials. What a coincidence!" J.J. looked uncertainly at Jupiter again, who shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Iowa," explained J.J.

"California," Jupiter said absently while he kept staring at the man.

"Really? I used to live there too! Oddly... we met someone just a week ago in Suerte who came from California. And tourists from the US seldom get lost in the Diamond City."

"We?" J.J. asked.

"Yes. My wife and I. She's in Suerte, now." He turned back to Jupiter and said, "Where exactly are you from?"

Jupiter's throat dried out. He had to clear his throat before he could answer. "Rock... Rockwell. It's near San Francisco."

The man who called himself Julius Jones shrugged his shoulders. "Never heard of it. I'm from near Los Angeles. But now we're living in Chicago."

Jupiter just nodded. He'd never heard of a place called Rockwell, either.

"If we want to reach the village before dark, we have to hurry now." Mr Jones turned around and got into his car.

Jupiter sat behind the wheel and tried to start the engine. His legs trembled so much that he let the clutch come too fast and strangled the car.

"Shall I drive?" J.J. offered.

Jupiter nodded gratefully. They switched places and J.J. followed the other car through the jungle.

"Thanks for reacting so well earlier," Jupiter said slowly.

"Because I didn't give your real name?"

Jupiter nodded.

"Why did you do that?" J.J. asked.

"What?" Jupiter wasn't paying attention.

"Why did you give him a false name? Do you know this man? His name's Jones, too. Is that a coincidence? Or is Pete your real name, and Jupiter Jones was made up?"

"No. My real name is Jupiter. And as to your first question, I don't know."

"You don't know why you told that man a different name? What do you mean by that?"

Jupiter was thinking. He was actually very confused. He had planned to search for the Jones couple in the Diamond City and then figure out how to approach them. Suddenly, there came this stranger who claimed to be Julius Jones, and in that very instant, Jupiter had come

up with nothing better than to deny his identity. He felt incredibly stupid. He had flown all the way to Venezuela to find answers and to settle his inner unrest. Now he had met the man he was looking for, and the restlessness had only increased. What would he do if that man was actually his father? Did he even want any of this? Everything would change. Suddenly, he wished he'd stayed home.

"J.J., please don't ask," Jupiter said softly.

"Are you on the run or something?"

"Please don't ask!" Jupiter replied a bit too loudly, paused and then apologized: "Sorry I shouted..."

J.J. kept silent, a bit offended and they continued their journey without saying another word. They reached the village when it was getting dark. Suerte was much smaller than Canaima and there was only one guesthouse. The place did not have much else to offer either. For tourists it was—unlike Canaima—rather uninteresting. There were many mines nearby. Almost everyone who lived here had something to do with gold or diamonds.

Jupiter and J.J. took a double room to save money.

When Jupiter could finally closed the door behind him, he was relieved. He couldn't have endured Mr Jones any longer.

After both had taken a long shower, J.J. asked: "Would you like to have a look at the village?"

Jupiter waved off. "No, thank you. I'm pretty tired. I'll probably go to bed."

"Suit yourself. I'm going to check this place out."

Jupiter was glad to be alone at last. He wanted to think undisturbed. Hiding his true identity had been a knee jerk reaction. But maybe that turned out to be a clever move. Jupiter wanted to be sure whether they were his parents or not. If so, then he could still face them openly. If not, he'd would just leave without bothering them. But before that, he had to find out the truth.

The next morning Jupiter and J.J. went together to the dining room for breakfast. Jupiter had been looking forward to rolls, cheese and jam. Instead he found black beans, scrambled eggs and a fried banana.

"Is this normal here?"

J.J. nodded. "This is the standard Venezuelan breakfast."

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. Carefully he tried a piece of the banana. Two more guests entered the room.

"Look, there's Mr Jones," J.J. said. "And that's probably his wife."

Jupiter flinched and bowed his head. Carefully he turned to take a look at two. They came right at them. Now Jupiter could no longer hide. He looked up and smiled.

"Good morning, Mr Jones," said J.J. cheerfully.

"Morning, boys." He turned to his wife. "May I introduce Jason and Pete. And this is my wife, Catherine."

Jupiter swallowed a piece of banana and began to cough loudly. Everybody flinched in horror. Tears shot him in the eye and J.J. patted him on the back.

When Jupiter had calmed down, Mr Jones continued: "What are you going to do today? You have to see the waterfalls. Isn't that right, Catherine?" His wife nodded and tugged at the hem of his shirt.

Julius Jones smiled embarrassedly. "Well, we'll have some breakfast first. Have a nice day, boys." The couple then left for another table a distance away.

“Strange woman,” J.J. remarked. “She didn’t say a word. But neither did you. Well, I only just got to know you, but you seem to be acting really weird. I know, I’m not supposed to ask questions, but I’d still like to know why they shouldn’t know who you are. And what do you want to do in Suerte. You’re not on vacation, are you?”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“You don’t act like you’re looking for relaxation or recreation. I’ve noticed that you are constantly under tension.”

Jupiter sighed. “You’re right. I’m not on vacation.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you later—when I know for sure myself.”

J.J. raised his eyebrows in doubt and shook his head. During breakfast, Jupiter repeatedly glanced over at the Jones couple. Suddenly Mrs Jones rose and left the room.

“I’ll be right back,” Jupiter mumbled, and got up. Keeping a safe distance behind, he followed the dark-haired woman down the hall to the stairs and from there to the first floor. At Room 108, he saw her took a key from her handbag, unlocked the door and went into the room.

Jupiter then went back downstairs. When he returned to the table, J.J. looked at him, puzzled. “What was that all about?”

“I was just getting something from our room.”

J.J. nodded, but looked doubtfully at Jupiter’s empty hands.

They ate in silence. At some point, Mrs Jones came back and joined her husband. A while later, the couple got up and left the dining room and went out to the street.

“J.J., can you do me a favour?” Jupiter asked, but didn’t wait for the answer. “Follow them both. If they come back here in less than fifteen minutes, then involve them in a conversation. Make sure they don’t go up to their room!”

J.J. stared at him. “What? Are you out of your mind?”

“Please! Trust me!”

“Trust you? We haven’t even known each other for twenty-four hours.”

“J.J. please! I really need your help. Please don’t let them go up until I come back down and signal to you!”

“What are you going to do?” J.J. wanted to know.

“Later! I’ll explain to you,” Jupe said. “Quick, or they’re gone!”

Jason drove his hands through his long hair. “It all smells like a detective story,” he said. “Are you one of the good guys or bad guys?”

“I’m the good guy!” said Jupiter forcefully. “I’m sure of it. Now go after them, or you’ll lose them!”

J.J. rolled his eyes. “All right, then. But then you’ll explain everything to me later?”

“Promise!”

The slender boy stood up and went out to the street. A moment later, he disappeared around a corner.

Jupiter got up too. Quickly he ran up the stairs and down the hall. He stopped outside the door to Room 108.

He pushed the handle down as a test, but the door was locked. Jupiter pulled out his keychain. There hung two lock picks which he had got from Pete. Actually, the Second Investigator was the lock expert, but Jupiter’s argument was that Bob or he might one day get into a situation where they had to open a door. That convinced Pete to leave part of his lock pick collection to Bob and Jupiter.

Jupiter tried to pick the lock. He wasn't an expert, though. Pete probably would have cracked the lock within seconds. It took the First Investigator two minutes until the lock finally yielded with a quiet click and the door opened.

He sneaked into the room and closed the door. He noticed that even from the inside, the door can only be locked with a key, so he decided to leave it unlocked.

The room was almost as furnished as theirs. Quickly he looked around. There were two empty suitcases under the bed. Jupiter opened the closet. The clothes had been properly hung. Apparently the Jones's planned a longer stay in Suerte.

There was a wallet on the table. He opened it. Two tourist cards were in it, a kind of visa that one got without difficulties at the airport. Jupiter had one, too. On these cards were the names of the owners—Catherine Jones and Julius Jones, living in Chicago. Jupiter wanted to check the dates of birth, but they weren't on the cards.

He flipped through the wallet. A few credit cards and some photos came to light. He looked at them—there were two photos of Catherine and Julius Jones, one of a woman he didn't know, and an old, faded photo of a child—a small, fat boy with light brown curls grinning into the camera. He might have been four years old.

Jupiter stared at the photo. His hair used to be lighter, as was usually the case with children. Aunt Mathilda had often told him that he also had curls at that time. The image was slightly overexposed and blurred. Nevertheless there was a certain similarity.

He looked at the photo with fascination and completely forgot where he was. Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

9. Family Feud

“So that’s it, then,” Pete said to Bob as he entered Headquarters. “Another school year gone by. Another report card I’d better hide from my parents.”

“That bad?”

“Well, it’s fine. I was able to pull up my overall grade with sports.”

“As always.” Bob bounced around restlessly on the desk chair. “What are we going to do with the holidays?”

“I know what you’re thinking,” Pete said. “You’d like to fly straight to Venezuela and help our revered First Investigator, wouldn’t you?”

“You guessed it,” Bob said. “And how about you?”

“I’d love to,” Pete replied. “But my finances just won’t let it happen.”

Bob grinned. “You had to buy yourself another new bike.”

“I had no idea what was coming,” Pete defended himself.

“If we can’t fly to Venezuela, we have to do our best to help Jupe here. I told my father to find out everything about the plane crash in the archives of his newspaper and fax it over to us.”

“What do you hope to get out of this?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know, but there should be something we can do. Jupe would do the same. First collect all the information you can get, and then see what you can do with it.”

The phone rang. Pete tried to reach for the receiver, but Bob held it back. “This might be for the fax machine.”

He was right. After the third ring, the device switched on and spat out a small stack of paper a few seconds later. They were copies of newspaper articles Bob’s father picked out. They split the pile and began to read.

“I still don’t know what we’re supposed to find here,” Pete said after reading two articles. “That was a plane crash like any other.”

Bob looked up from his paper in indignation. “What are you talking about!”

“It’s true. Aircraft accidents are tragic, but ultimately nothing peculiar. The media will first report that a plane has crashed. Then the newscasters talk about technical defects, human error or some still unexplained cause, about flight recorders that have to be found, and about the number of dead and injured. There’s nothing else in these articles either. In this case, it was a technical defect—a fuel tank had a leak, there was an explosion and the plane crashed into the sea. No one survived.”

Bob sighed and lowered the paper. “You’re right. I don’t know what I was hoping to get out of it either. Maybe a clue that there were survivors after all. But on that point, all the reports are clear.”

“That means that Jupe’s parents definitely lost their lives back then,” Pete concluded.

“Unless...” Bob began, then his face suddenly lit up, “unless Jupiter was right about one of his assumptions and they only faked the accident. In other words, they weren’t on board the plane at all!”

“Where else would they have been?” Pete was sceptical.

“That’s what we need to find out. But then the rest would also make sense—The Jones couple pretends to fly away. The plane crashes, but without the two on board. Still, they never called back. What does that mean? They wanted to get away!”

“Get away? Why?”

“Well... because they had something to hide,” Bob replied hesitantly.

“Hide? Like some criminals?” Pete said. “Jupe’s parents?”

“It’s just a theory.”

Pete ignored the objection. “You don’t think that the parents of the greatest detective since Sherlock Holmes were felons?”

“Anything is possible.”

Pete crossed his arms in front of his chest. “That’s absurd.”

“If we assume that the Catherine and Julius Jones in Venezuela are Jupe’s parents, that is the only logical explanation I can think of. And we should check it out,” Bob said. “Do you remember Uncle Titus’s strange reaction when we showed him the photo? Maybe there was more to it than he wanted to admit. Maybe the Jones family is keeping a dark secret. We could find out if Jupe’s parents were ever involved in, say, a crime.”

“And how?”

“By questioning someone else.”

“You’re not talking about Aunt Mathilda.” The Second Investigator frowned. “If Uncle Titus has problems with Catherine Jones, I don’t want to know what Aunt Mathilda has to tell us.”

“Who else should we ask?” Bob wondered aloud. “I don’t know anybody in Jupe’s family. At least not from the Jones side.”

Pete sighed. “If we really want to question Aunt Mathilda, we’ll have to be very careful.”

“We will,” Bob promised and both of them left the trailer.

Aunt Mathilda sat in the office of The Jones Salvage Yard and did the bookkeeping. “Hello, you two,” she said. “Do you want to keep me from working? That’s very kind of you because I can’t concentrate anyway. I keep thinking about Jupe.”

“That’s what we want to talk to you,” Bob began. “We’re trying to help him as best we can from here.”

He explained to her how important it was for them to learn more about Jupe’s parents. “We’ve already spoken to Uncle Titus. But he was... very irritated when the name Catherine Jones came up.”

Aunt Mathilda closed the folder she was working on. “He told me about your conversation. I think in hindsight he’s sorry he was so irritated. But things have happened between him and Catherine that still drive him crazy after so many years.”

Aunt Mathilda seemed very calm. Pete was relieved and dared to ask the next question: “Can you tell us exactly what happened?”

“Do you think this might be important for your investigation?” Aunt Mathilda asked.

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

“All right, I’ll tell you. Back then, it was about money. Catherine has always used Julius’s name to borrow something from Titus. She claimed that Julius was in deep trouble, but would not dare to go to Titus himself. Titus gave her the money—a lot. It turned out, however, that it was never meant for Julius, but for Catherine’s own brother, who was in a lot of trouble. I never knew what this was really about. Titus never saw the money again and blamed Catherine for it. After all, she had betrayed his trust. They argued for months, until the contact finally broke off. Julius’s attempts to reassure his brother also failed. That was a very ugly story back then.”

Bob scratched his chin. "Maybe this will actually take us a step further."

"Yeah? How?" Pete asked.

"I'll have to check it out first," Bob said. "If we find out anything, we'll let you know right away. Thank you very much for your help."

Pete and Bob left the office.

"What do you mean, it takes us a step further?" Pete asked Bob. "What are you gonna do?"

"We're going see Chief Reynolds. Maybe there was more to this money story than Aunt Mathilda knows. If we're going to find out anything about the Jones family, Reynolds has to help us."

10. The Eavesdropper

Jupiter quickly stuffed the photos back into the wallet and put it back in its original position on the table. A key was jingling. Then he saw that the closet door was open. Jupiter pushed the clothes aside, hid in the closet and closed it from the inside.

He could still hear the sound of keys jingling. A few seconds later, he heard the door open. A woman's voice grumbled something in Spanish. Then he realized what happened. He did not lock the door, and that woman was fumbling with the keys trying to unlock an unlocked door.

After a few moments a loud hum sounded. It sounded like a vacuum cleaner.

"The cleaning lady," Jupiter thought. "I'm sure she wondered why the room wasn't locked. More importantly, I hope she's not curious and looks in the closet."

He started sweating. It was very hot in the closet between all the clothes. Besides, it stank of moth powder.

The vacuum cleaner sucked and sucked. The room wasn't that big! When the humming finally stopped, the cheerful whistling of the woman and the making of the bed could be heard.

When was she finally done? A drop of sweat slowly ran down Jupiter's back. It tickled, but the closet was so tight he couldn't scratch. It took more than fifteen minutes for the cleaning lady to finish. The whistling stopped, the door opened, closed again and it became quiet. After a short moment Jupiter heard the door being locked. The First Investigator twisted his eyes. He waited a few seconds before opening the closet and stumbling outside. He breathed deeply, then arranged the clothes in the closet and closed it.

"And now I have to get out of here somehow."

To unlock the door, Jupiter had to pull out his lock picks again. "My fifteen minutes was long over," Jupe thought. "If they come back now, J.J. won't stop them." With trembling fingers he tampered with the lock. "Come on, now!" he said to himself.

Suddenly he heard footsteps in the hall. He paused. The steps came closer... closer... and stopped right in front of the door!

"Do you have the key?"

That was the voice of Mr Jones! Jupiter ran back to the closet, ripped it open, took his old place, and just managed to close the door. Then he heard a few people slowly entering the room. Jupiter listened attentively.

"Sit down, Arturo," said Mr Jones.

"Would you like something to drink?" his wife offered.

"I don't think that's necessary," replied a male voice with a strong Spanish accent.

"Why so reserved, old boy?" asked Mr Jones. "Are you afraid we'll poison you?"

"I think it's better if we finish the negocia... uh... business first," the man said. "After that, I like a glass. Money is better talked about with a clear head."

"Good. We'll get right to the point. My husband and I have been thinking that the money for us is not enough. After all, we risk getting caught by customs every time we leave the country."

“And I risk every time that you don’t come back with the balance amount and my goods are gone!”

“But, Arturo, we wouldn’t do that, we’re friends! And business partners, too,” Mr Jones said. “Of course, we could disappear with the goods. But that would cut off our source of money. But my wife is right—it is too risky in the long run. After all, we come to Suerte four times a year. The authorities could notice our frequent visits. To make the risk worthwhile, you’ll have to pay a little more.”

“Then I make you a suggestion,” Arturo said. “You only come twice a year and take twice as much with you. It’s not so obvious.”

“Too dangerous,” said Mrs Jones. “That’s too many stones. We can’t hide them well enough.”

“You could take suitcases with double bottoms,” Arturo suggested.

“We want more money, Arturo!” Mr Jones said with a harsh tone.

“¿Cuánto?”

“Twenty percent more,” Mr Jones said.

“Twenty percent?” The Venezuelan was horrified. “I could give you five percent, not more.”

“Twenty.” Mr Jones insisted.

“Julius, I have a wife and children! Many *hijos*! I must live too!”

“Don’t get us on the South American extended family tour,” said Mrs Jones. “We all know very well that you earn more from this business than most of your countrymen.”

“All right, I’ll give you ten percent.” Arturo counter-offered.

“Fifteen, or you can find other couriers,” said Mr Jones.

For a time there was silence. Jupiter’s heart pounded so loud that he feared it could be heard through the closet door. Then Arturo said, “All right. But only with the next delivery!”

“Agreed,” Mr Jones said.

“Then now you give me the partial payment,” Arturo said.

“Where did you hide it, Catherine?”

“In the closet. Wait, I’ll get it.”

Pete and Bob found out that Chief Reynolds was away from Rocky Beach on some assignment. However, they managed to meet up with Inspector Cotta.

The Three Investigators had regularly collaborated with the Rocky Beach Police Department, and their main contacts there were Chief Reynolds and Inspector Cotta. In many of their past cases, the three had assisted the police in the solution of many crimes. In turn, the police officers have helped the three usually with information. However, as police information are confidential, the police officers have been very careful as to what information they could give to the three of them.

“You’re lucky to get me today,” said Inspector Cotta. “Today is the last day of school and a lot of people are on their way on holidays. The highways will be hopelessly congested this afternoon. Chief Reynolds has left instructions that all available people be ready to deal with the traffic chaos, including me! I’m an inspector but I’ve been a traffic policeman a long time!”

“Are you too good for this very important task?” Pete laughed.

“Don’t be so cheeky, Pete. Surely you are here because you need my help again, don’t you?” He grinned and put his chin on his hand.

“That’s right,” Bob said. “Do you want to hear the whole story or should I get straight to the point?”

“Give me the short version.”

Bob told the inspector what had happened. Cotta was amazed when he heard the story about Jupiter and his parents. “Then your latest investigations are more of a private nature. But how can I help you?”

“Very simple,” Pete began. “It occurred to us that this whole story only makes sense when Jupiter’s parents had something to hide, for example, if they were involved in any criminal activities.”

Cotta raised her eyebrows. “Criminal activities? The parents of the First Investigator Jupiter Jones, of all people?”

“It seemed unlikely to me, too,” Pete admitted.

“But when you think about it, that’s the only logical explanation. Maybe crime runs in the Jones family, only that for Jupiter he doesn’t commits crimes, instead he solves them.”

“All right. But I still don’t know what you want from me.”

“We’d have to take a look at the resident register, or whatever it’s called,” Bob explained. “Maybe we’ll find a clue to the Jones’s past there.”

Now Cotta’s eyebrows lowered. “You know very well that I can’t do that. The keyword is ‘Privacy’.”

“We know, but you have often bent the rules for us,” Pete replied. “Could you just do again this time?”

“That was always about a specific case,” Cotta said. “It was police work, so to speak, and allowed in that context.”

“Maybe this thing will become police work, too,” Bob thought. “Who knows what we’ll discover.”

“So far, it’s nothing more than speculation that have absolutely nothing to do with solving a crime,” Cotta said. “There’s nothing I can do.”

“But we have a clue,” Pete explained. “Jupiter’s aunt spoke of some obscure money story that happened many years ago. Where money is involved, crime is sometimes not far away.”

“A very shaky clue,” mumbled Cotta.

“But it’s about Jupiter!” Pete cried. “We must help him, we owe it to him! And I think so do you. After all, he’s already done a lot for you.”

“Do you really think you can help him in this way? Even if you find something out, you can’t reach him in Venezuela.”

“Maybe he’ll get back to us,” Bob said. “We’re definitely gonna have to try.”

Cotta leaned back sighing. “All right. I’m gonna get in a lot of trouble if this gets out. Then I can really work as a traffic cop again. But I’m a good-natured man. Look, I have to access the system because I cannot let you use it directly.”

“Thank you very much. I’m sure it won’t come out. And if you do get fired, we’ll get you a job at The Jones Salvage Yard.” Pete grinned broadly.

Cotta laughed. “Well, thank you very much. I’d rather not.” He turned to the computer and entered some commands. Then he turned the screen so that Pete and Bob could see something. Two colour photos appeared, next to them stood a lot of information.

“Here they are—Julius and Catherine Jones. Both born in Los Angeles, one son—Jupiter Justus Jones.”

“Jupiter *Justus*?” cried Pete. Then he started laughing at the top of his lungs. “Jupiter Justus? I always knew that the Jones family had a strange sense of naming, but ‘Justus’ surpasses everything!”

“He never told us that!” Bob said. “Well, I’d hide it too if I had a middle name like that.” Cotta stayed serious. “We have a problem with Julius and Catherine.”

“And?” Pete and Bob asked at the same time.

The inspector pointed to the screen. “There are two dates of birth here, but no date of death. According to the record, they’re still alive.”

11. Dangerous Knowledge

Jupiter quietly took a sweater and quickly used it to cover his head and a part of his upper body. He was then prepared to spring a surprise. When he saw that the closet door was slowly opening, with a swift action, he kicked at it hard. He barged out and bumped into Mrs Jones, who screamed in surprise. Jupiter rushed towards the door, opened it and ran out.

Mr Jones ran after him. Jupiter gripped the sweater even tighter over his head. "Stop! You there!" Mr Jones shouted.

Jupiter didn't care. He felt so relieved that the door was not locked. When he reached the stairs, he stumbled down and was on the street a few moments later. There he ran to the edge of the Diamond City, where the jungle began. Mr Jones was still after him. Fortunately he wasn't very slim either and so Jupiter slowly won despite his lack of fitness.

He ran into the rainforest, broke through the undergrowth and jumped over ferns and small bushes. Already after thirty metres the maze of trees had swallowed him up and when Jupiter looked back, he didn't see anyone, including Mr Jones. Jupiter ran on for safety's sake. On the way the sweater got stuck on a branch, but he didn't care. Eventually, he stopped, still panting.

The air was so hot and humid that he was sweating again. His skin was tingling unpleasantly. He knocked an annoying mosquito aside, leaned exhausted against a tree and listened. There was a not-too-distant splash and the twittering and chirping of birds.

What was he supposed to do now? Did the Jones recognize him? If so, what would they do? Then he concentrated on what he had learned. It wasn't much. He still didn't know if Catherine and Julius Jones were his parents.

But he had overheard a conversation that didn't exactly encourage him. The photo of the child came to his mind. Had he actually looked at himself in the eye?

Something tickled his hand, with which he had leaned against the tree. Jupiter wanted to wipe it off. He touched something big and hairy. Horrified, he stared at a brown spider the size of a small saucer that was about to climb the back of his hand. He tore his hand off and threw the spider into a bush. He quickly took a few steps back and collided with an obstacle. He whirled around—it was a tree!

Jupiter's heart was racing. He wanted to run straight back to the village immediately, but he feared that he could be caught by the Jones couple. So he had to stay in this spider-covered jungle for a while.

Jupiter chased away his thoughts and looked up. The first thing he needed was a reasonably safe place to rest.

Suddenly a hand lay on his shoulder from behind.

"There must be some mistake," Pete said as he stared at the colour images on the monitor. "Catherine and Julius Jones are dead. Or at least they should have been declared dead!"

"You can see it right here," Inspector Cotta replied. "They're alive—according to the computer—and they are in Chicago."

“Pete’s right,” Bob said. “This must be a mistake! There was even a funeral. Maybe they forgot to enter into the computer that they both died twelve years ago. Can something like that happen?”

Cotta shook his head. “I can’t imagine.”

“Then there must be some mistake,” Pete thought.

“This information here is that of Jupe’s parents. There’s Jupe’s name on it. That can’t be a coincidence,” Bob remarked. “And look at this picture of Mrs Jones. This is the same woman that Hector Sebastian photographed. She is a few years younger in this picture, but you can recognize her without a doubt.”

“When was the photos last updated?” Pete asked.

Cotta called up another page from the program. “Fourteen years ago. Both photos.”

“Then she hasn’t changed much. She looks no more than eight years younger in these photos than in Mr Sebastian’s photos,” Bob noted.

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “Then she just kept herself young. I find it much more remarkable that the photos were taken shortly before their supposed death. That might show that they must be dead. Otherwise it would certainly have been updated in the last fourteen years.”

“That’s right, Pete,” Cotta said. “Actually, every ten years a new photo has to be entered into a person’s file. That’s really weird.”

“There’s something terribly lazy about this,” Bob murmured. “I just can’t figure out what it is. Anyway, I’ll write down their address in Chicago.”

“Are you going there?” Pete asked.

“No,” Bob replied. “But at least we can make a call.”

“But they’re in Venezuela,” Pete said.

“Maybe they’re back already,” Bob said. “We’re definitely gonna have to try.”

Cotta frowned. “Do you really think you can help Jupiter that way? Knowing the mastermind, he’s probably already so far into the case that he doesn’t need your help.”

Pete grinned in agony. “Jupiter may be a mastermind, but without us he can still be in quite a mess. Who knows, maybe he’s already in trouble—but I really hope not!”

Jupiter tried to tear himself free, but the hand held him back. “Hey! I’m not a spider! And by the way, the one on your hand was just a tarantula and they’re not half as dangerous as most people think.”

He turned around. “J.J.! What are you doing here?”

“I followed the Jones over twenty minutes, and then I went to see the waterfall over there,” J.J. replied. “Shall I show you?”

Jupiter was far too surprised to answer. He just nodded.

“Good. Then you can explain a few things to me right now.”

“I guess I owe you that,” admitted the First Investigator.

“I see it that way too. Come on!”

They fought their way through the undergrowth in the direction from which the sound of water came.

Suddenly the jungle retreated and opened a small clearing, through which a narrow watercourse flowed. A big rock stood in the middle surrounded by trees. Jupiter remembered that this country was very mountainous, but the mountains were rarely visible through the dense rainforest. The water shot down from a height of about five metres and continued its

rippling way down below. On a small stone nearby there was a drawing pad and crayons of different colours.

"Is that yours?" Jupiter asked.

J.J. nodded. "I was trying to draw the waterfall."

"May I have a look?"

The rock and water could be seen in great detail. The trees behind it were brown and green.

"That's good!" Jupe said. "How did you do that?"

"I'm studying art in Iowa. Didn't I tell you that? That's one of the reasons I came to South America. You'll find great motifs here."

"Very impressive," Jupiter said. "I can't even draw stick figures."

J.J. grinned. "You're more of a head person, aren't you?"

Jupiter looked up in surprise. "Am I that easy to see through?"

"Partly. I haven't figured out a whole lot of things yet," J.J. said. "What was all that about before? Why should I go after Mr and Mrs Jones and stop them if I have to? Why are you acting so strange to them? Why are you impersonating Pete Crenshaw? And why are you running through the middle of this jungle like someone's after you?"

"You saw me?"

"And heard."

Jupiter sighed and sat down on a rock. "Do you really want to hear the whole story?"

J.J. smiled. "You don't have to tell me everything. If it's none of my business, fine. But since I'm already supposed to pursue innocent people, I have a certain right to know. Don't you think?"

"I do. Then I can tell you everything." He sighed again and explained everything to J.J. from the beginning.

J.J. was amazed when he learned the true reason for Jupiter's stay in Venezuela. "I never expected the whole story to take such a turn. I only broke into their room to find evidence of their identity. Sure, I could have asked her directly, but I was afraid of her reaction. And then suddenly I was hiding in that closet without really knowing what was happening to me, and I heard the Jones discussing some crooked business with a certain Arturo."

"Do you have any idea exactly what that was about?" J.J. asked.

"They talked about stones," Jupiter replied. "That can only mean diamonds. I suspect they regularly come to Suerte to get the stones from a mine owner, which they then illegally bring to the US."

"Why do you think that is illegal?"

"The prices of diamonds in Venezuela are very low. When you sell them in the US, you make huge profits. Therefore, it is not allowed to bring diamonds out of this country. Catherine and Julius Jones seem to be smugglers who make a living from the money the mine owner pays them. Of course it's risky, because if they get caught with the goods at customs, they go to jail." Jupiter shook his head. "It's crazy. Normally I would give the police a tip to catch them red-handed the next time they want to leave the country. But what if they're really my parents?"

"Would that change anything?" J.J. asked.

"I've become very insecure," Jupe replied. "I never was before."

"What are you gonna do now?"

"I don't know. I need to find out who they really are. I can't make any more decisions until I do," Jupiter said. "The stupid thing is, I can't just walk up to them right now. I don't know if they recognizes me."

"I saw you had something on your head, didn't you?"

"I did. But I don't know if that's enough. They definitely know someone is on their trail." Suddenly he laughed. "This is really an irony of fate. Even if they are my parents, of all people, these two are still criminals. And I've always been committed to fighting crime."

"What do you mean by that?"

Jupiter took out their business card, which was crumpled badly in his back pocket, and gave it to J.J. It said:



Jupiter then told him about his detective business and some of the cases they had solved. A while later, the conversation went back to the current case.

Jupiter continued: "Now I don't know which side I'm on. And that's only because I'm personally involved. Would you report your parents if you knew they were smuggling diamonds?"

J.J. laughed. "What a question! I don't think anyone can answer that. For you, your parents died twelve years ago. That may sound illogical. But I don't think anything would change, even if they turned out to be alive."

Jupiter looked at the waterfall with his mind set on it. "I know what you mean. Meanwhile, I wish my parents were actually dead. That's completely illogical. But I have no idea what to do if they're not."

They sat by the waterfall for another hour. J.J. completed his drawing while Jupiter talked about what had bothered him in the last few days. "I usually discuss these things with my friends Pete and Bob, or my girlfriend, Lys. Since they're not here, I'm fortunate to have you here."

J.J. grinned. "Pleasure to meet you."

"I'm hungry!" Juve said. "Shall we go back and get something to eat?"

"All right. What if we meet the Jones couple?"

Jupiter rose. "Good question. I hope we don't meet them. But I think I should take some precautions in case they suspect that I was the intruder. I only managed to cover my head when I ran out, but they might recognize this green T-shirt I am wearing. So I'd better get another one at a shop and change before going back to the guesthouse."

J.J. packed up his drawing things. "Good idea. Better still, you say hidden while I go get the T-Shirt for you. It could be dangerous if those two recognized you. After all, you witnessed their conversation with this Arturo. Who knows what they'll do to you."

"I want to try to find out more about the two of them," Jupiter said. "If I can't do it by tomorrow night, I'm going to the police. Hopefully there will be one in Canaima."

They strolled back through the rainforest. This time Jupiter paid meticulous attention to where he stepped and what he touched. Fortunately, no other tarantula was seen.

In Suerte, just before coming out of the forest, J.J. asked Jupiter to remain hidden while he went to a shop to get a new red T-Shirt. After Jupiter changed, they decided to get

something to eat before going back to the guesthouse. They found a small restaurant.

“I won’t be able to see any chickens running around,” groaned J.J. as he looked at his plate.

“I like it,” Jupiter said with a smack. After all, he hadn’t had a real breakfast.

Suddenly a voice called from behind them: “Hello, boys!”

Jupiter turned around. Catherine Jones came up to them.

12. Bob Brings Colour into the Game

Jupiter tried to make himself invisible. He bowed his head and pretended not to have seen Mrs Jones. At the same moment, he realized how silly his behaviour was. So he raised his head again and looked directly at Catherine Jones. If he couldn't hide, at least he shouldn't show any signs of uneasiness.

But her reaction was quite different than expected. "Good that I see you. Your room is very close to ours, isn't it? Imagine that we were broken into this morning!"

J.J. reacted with lightning speed and skill. "Really? How did that happen? Has anything been stolen?" His quick perception now also helped Jupiter to hide his shock and make a surprisingly interested face.

"The burglar somehow got the door open. We already spoke to the maid. She swore that the door was unlocked when she went in to do the cleaning. When we returned, I was about to open the closet when someone rushed out from there. He had a sweater over his face, so we didn't recognize him. He ran out the door and was already gone.

"My husband chased after him, but he's not the fastest. The burglar fled to the rainforest. That's where my husband lost his trail. It all happened so fast, we didn't even know what was happening to us."

"And what did he steal?" Jupiter asked hypocritically.

"Nothing, as far as we could tell," Mrs Jones replied. "He just went through my husband's wallet. But there was no money in it. When he wanted to search the room for other valuables, we must have surprised him."

"And you really didn't recognize him?" Jupe's face got hot. He hoped she didn't notice.

She shook her head. "All I saw was that he had dark hair. I think it was a local." She laughed. "But I guess that's not surprising when you're here, is it? Anyway, I'd like to warn you. It's better if you take a look in your room. Maybe he was there, too. I've already spoken to the guesthouse owner about that. In the future, he wants to make sure that no unauthorized person enters the house."

"Thank you for the warning, Mrs Jones," Jupiter said. "You're really not safe anywhere these days." In return, he reaped a kick from J.J. under the table.

"I hope you have a nice vacation after all," Mrs Jones continued. "My husband and I are leaving the day after tomorrow."

"The day after tomorrow? So soon?" Jupiter asked in astonishment.

"Yes. We both have responsibilities."

"I like to think so," Jupiter thought quietly.

"That's why I have to keep going. We still have some work to do." Mrs Jones said goodbye and left the place.

"Wow," J.J. whispered, "at first I thought it was all over."

"Me too," confessed Jupiter. "I'm still very anxious. But it couldn't have gone any better. First, they didn't recognize me and second, they think it was a local in their closet. This has another advantage—very few Venezuelans speak English. So they can assume that the burglar did not understand a word of what was spoken in the room. They'll still feel safe."

"Perfect," J.J. agreed with him.

“Almost, anyway.” Jupiter became thoughtful. “But one thing was strange. Have you noticed how open and friendly she suddenly was? Last time she didn’t say a word.”

J.J. shrugged his shoulders. “And what does that mean?”

“I don’t know yet. The day after tomorrow, they leave. I still have two days to figure it out and come up with a plan.”

The next morning Pete and Bob were sitting at Headquarters, brooding. They had called Chicago, but an answering machine had told them that the Jones couple were away. So in effect, they had learned nothing new.

The phone then rang. Bob picked up. “The Three Investigators, Bob Andrews speaking.”

“Hi, it’s Lys. I was hoping you’d be at Headquarters. Have you heard anything from Jupe?”

“No. He hasn’t called back yet.”

Lys sighed. “I thought there was news. I’m really worried.”

Bob drew circles on the desk pad. “So are we. Pete and I should have gone with him. But the school would not have let us go. And, of course, we don’t have enough money.”

“I’m in trouble too,” Lys said. “My mother is sick. You know, my parents live on the east coast. I would like to go there to be with them. But at the same time, I want to stay here. Otherwise something might happen to Jupe and I want to help.”

“Don’t worry about Jupe,” Bob replied. “We’re still here. If you want, we’ll call you as soon as we hear anything new.”

“That’d be nice. I’ll get back to you before I go. Then I’ll give you my parents’ number. Bye.”

“All right. Bye.”

Bob turned on the desk chair and looked at the mess on the floor of the trailer. “If we don’t any more ideas, we might as well clean up.”

“Actually...” Pete mumbled, boringly bumping his foot on the side of a cardboard box placed on a stack of folders. The box slipped, fell over and a flood of photos poured out to the floor.

“Great,” Bob commented on the accident. “Now we should actually clear up this mess.”

Pete bent down and picked up some photos. “Hey, look. These are photos of Jupe’s parents. Do you think they look like those on the computer?”

“Let me see! Hmm... There seem to be a few years between the shots. She bears a certain resemblance. With him it’s hard to say. In this photo, he has a beard and still has hair on his head. In the computer photo, there is no beard or hair. This changes a person a lot.”

“Wait a minute,” Pete said. “There’s a few years between the photos? Is that logical? The computer photos are supposed to be fourteen years old according to Cotta. Then these photos should be much older!”

“I don’t know,” Bob said. “After all, these are in black and white... But...” Bob broke off and stared at the photos.

“But what?” Pete asked. “Hey, Bob! What?”

Bob didn’t answer. With narrowed eyes, he stared at the photos, but he seemed to look through them.

“Don’t make it so exciting!” Pete exclaimed. “Do you want to imitate Jupe? Then you’ll have to fiddle with your lower lip.”

Bob looked up. “I recently read an article in one of Jupe’s computer magazines. Wait a minute, it’s got to be somewhere here.” He rummaged through a stack of papers lying on his

desk. “No, it’s not here. Then it must be under this mess over here.” He set about moving the files to another corner.

“What are you doing?” Pete asked, annoyed. “What would the magazine have to do with the photos? ... Hey, will you answer me?”

“Yes, when I find the computer magazine,” Bob answered. “Come on, help me find it! Maybe they’re in the filing cabinet.”

Pete moaned, opened the cabinet and rummaged through the mountains of paper in there. A stack slipped out and fell to the ground. “Today is not my day. But whatever, this mess is hard to beat anyway. Are you looking for these?” He held out a few magazines to Bob.

“Yes, exactly!” Bob looked through them and finally took one and flipped through it. He found the article he was looking for, scanned it and then shouted: “Here! This report summarizes the technical developments of computers over the last twenty years. Here it is—colour scanners haven’t been around that long. In the past, it was only possible to scan images in black and white.”

“Huh?” Pete didn’t understand him. He wasn’t particularly interested in computers, anyway. “Colour scanner? What are you talking about?”

“A scanner is a device with which one can copy documents or pictures into a computer, so to speak. You put an image on the scanner, scan it, and then you have it on the screen. This is how the images are created for the resident register system that we saw in Cotta’s office.”

“Yes. And?”

“The photos of Mr and Mrs Jones were in colour,” Bob explained, looking at the Second Investigator expectantly. But Pete still didn’t understand what it was all about. “But colour scanners did not exist at that time the computer images were supposedly put into the system. Cotta said that the last photo update was around fourteen years ago. That’s why the computer entry must be...”

“A fake!” Pete exclaimed enthusiastically. “You’re right! If the computer images were actually fourteen years old, they’d have to be in black and white.”

“But they weren’t. You got it?”

“And what does that mean?” Pete asked.

“That means that we’d have to pay Cotta another visit.”

“What’s your plan?” J.J. asked while they were sitting at the breakfast table. Yesterday they had spent some time exploring the village and the area. Jupiter had desperately needed some change to clear his head. He had learned a lot of new things and wanted to sleep on them for one night before making a decision.

“I don’t have one,” confessed the First Investigator. “This is very disturbing... I always have a plan.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Probably what I know currently about this case is not logical,” Jupe replied.

J.J. shoved a spoonful of black beans into his mouth and asked, chewing, “What do you mean? It’s obvious that the Jones are diamond smugglers. That’s what you said yesterday. I’m not that experienced at figuring out things.”

“The case is not logical because I’m acting illogically,” Jupiter explained. “At least I understood that much. Because I still don’t know if they are my parents or not, I don’t act like I would otherwise do.”

“Then do something about it, then,” J.J. suggested. “Get this sorted out first. Go to the Jones and speak to them directly. It’s the only way you’re gonna find out anyway. Or do you

want to break into their room again? I don't think you will find any more evidence there anyway."

"And if they don't tell me the truth?" Jupiter asked doubtfully. "If they're my parents, they'll have had a reason to let me down back then. Why would they openly admit that now?"

J.J. put the spoon aside, sighed and bent over.

"Jupiter Jones," he said slowly. "You'll be sitting around here for a year and you still won't be able to decide what to do if you keep thinking in circles. You should act now. Tomorrow, after they leave, it will be too late. And until then, you have to decide whether or not to call the police."

Jupiter looked at him for a long time. "I've always been the head of The Three Investigators. Nevertheless, I was dependent on the help of Pete and Bob. I don't have that now. I have to do everything myself."

J.J. nodded to him encouragingly.

"Okay. Then I'll do it." Jupe got up.

"Now?" asked J.J.

"Now!"

"Should I come with you?"

Jupiter shook his head. "No. I'll have to do this alone."

"Good luck then!"

"Thank you." Jupiter went from the dining room to the stairwell, climbed up the stairs to the first floor and stopped in front of Room 108. There he took a deep breath and knocked decisively.

A few seconds later, Mr Jones opened the door. He looked at Jupiter in surprise. "You?"

"Good morning, Mr Jones. May I come in for a moment? I need to talk to you and your wife." Mr Jones hesitated for a moment, then stepped aside and let Jupiter enter.

The First Investigator took a look in the room. Opened suitcases laid on the beds and Mrs Jones was about to put the last pieces of clothing into them. She looked at him.

"You're packing already?" Jupe asked. "But I thought you are leaving tomorrow..."

"Wrong thinking, boy!" Mr Jones shouted suddenly. He slammed the door shut in a flash and locked it from the inside with a key. Then he pulled out the key and put it in his pocket.

"What..." Jupe cried, stunned.

"You didn't think we recognized you yesterday when you came out of the closet, did you?" Mr Jones grinned gloatingly. "But your disguise wasn't good enough!"

"But you did..." Jupiter began, confused.

Catherine Jones said to him, "I made you believe we didn't recognize you."

"And you wanted me to believe that you'd be leaving tomorrow," Jupiter said grimly. "... So you can get out of here today without any trouble."

"So you're not so stupid after all," Mr Jones replied. "But we won't let a little snooper like you mess up our tour, Pete Crenshaw."

"You smuggle diamonds, right?" Jupiter asked. Now he could play with his cards open, as he had nothing to lose.

"Exactly. And you can't stop us."

"What are you going to do now?"

Mrs Jones smiled. "I'm sure we won't let you go, if that's what you mean. At least not until we're gone."

Jupiter took a deep breath. "Fine. While we're about to drop our masks, I also have a surprise for you—My name's not Pete Crenshaw. My real name is Jupiter Jones."

13. Two Tough Criminals

“You two again? I tell you right away again—I can’t go over the limits of the law for you.” Cotta bent over aggressively as Pete and Bob entered his office.

“How do you do? Were you called to an accident scene yesterday,” Pete asked cheerfully. He wanted to raise the mood a little before they told Cotta about their new request.

“Surprisingly, no. I got lucky again. But you can save yourself the small talk, Pete. Because I have work to do. Let’s get right to it!” Cotta snapped.

The Second Investigator’s smile disappeared. He sat down.

“We found out something,” Bob began. “The photos in your computer records must be forgeries.”

Cotta raised an eyebrow. “Oh, such a bold assertion that I believe only Jupiter could make. What makes you say that?”

Bob explained it to him. “The photo can never be fourteen years old. So someone must have manipulated the computer records.”

“This is a system used by the police,” Cotta disagreed. “You can’t just manipulate it like that. But I can understand your point. And as I know you, do you already have a theory—if not the solution to the puzzle?”

“A theory,” Bob confessed. “We believe that two other people have adopted the identities of Catherine and Julius Jones to go into hiding.”

“How do you think they did it?”

“I don’t know. But if I’m right, there should be two wanted criminals in the police files who look the same but are known by different names. Couldn’t we find out?”

Cotta laughed. “If I had to browse the entire criminal database, you can come back next year.”

Pete was surprised. “Are there really that many wanted criminals?”

“We live in a bad world, Pete. You’d need a few days just to deal with California mug shots. This of course also has an advantage—detectives and police officers are guaranteed never to die out.”

“Is this criminal record also stored in the computer?” Bob asked.

Cotta nodded.

“Then wouldn’t it be possible to shorten the search?”

“How’s that gonna work?”

“You could start a search program that would comb through all the computer entries for the photos of Julius and Catherine Jones.”

Inspector Cotta smiled approvingly. “Not a bad idea. However, the program might only be able to find them if they are exactly the same photos. After all, it can’t think abstractly and match records based on similarity of photos. I don’t think that the system we have here is that sophisticated.”

“Yes, I understand, but it’s worth a try,” Bob found.

“Fine. Computers aren’t exactly my passion,” Cotta said. “I don’t know if I can get anything out of it.”

Pete raised his hands defensively. "You can't count on me. I'm at war with these things."

"If only Jupe were here," Bob murmured. "He'd program everything in a minute, just the way we want it."

They set to work. The police computer system turned out to be very stubborn. Again and again the system gave out a shrill beep that it would not accept this or that command or search criteria.

"That can't be that difficult," Pete moaned. "Our small computer at Headquarters can accept a search command and it will display the results. What's the problem here?"

"You're welcome to suggest something here," Bob hissed. "You have to understand that sophisticated systems like this one here work differently as they have to go through a lot more records across many databases in various departments."

Pete didn't reply. Bob rarely got mad. But if he did, you'd better back off!

"Well, once again, the system is not accepting our search criteria..." Cotta said.

Bob could only watch and occasionally suggest to Cotta what to try. He would have loved to do the search himself but he understood Cotta's concern regarding letting them access the system directly. At least, Cotta is authorized to use it and could spare his time to try. Bob could only hope that he'll succeed.

After about twenty minutes, and numerous tries, the computer accepted the search terms and displayed the words "Searching...".

"Ha! The request was accepted," Cotta called out. "Now we must wait."

"How long will this take?" Pete asked.

"It's got to go through thousands of records," Cotta replied. "It's gonna need some time for that, I think."

They stared spellbound at the screen. After five minutes it beeped again.

"Oh, no!" Pete moaned. "Nothing again?"

"Wrong," Bob said. "We've found it!"

The same photos of Catherine and Julius Jones appeared on the screen. But this time there were other names next to it.

"Wendy and Richard Fletcher of Poughkeepsie, New York," Cotta read out.

"Wow!" Pete was thrilled. "He's a banker and she's an IT specialist. That explains a lot. With their knowledge, they would certainly be able to hack computer systems and do some manipulation!"

"Well said!" Bob praised Pete. "I believe that they got the records of the real Catherine and Julius Jones changed by replacing the photos and deleting the entries relating to the plane accident. Then they had papers and documents forged with these alternate identities."

"And look what it says here," Pete remarked. "Wendy and Richard Fletcher are wanted for a robbery at the New York Elf Bank. They've taken hostages and stole half a million dollars!"

"And one of the hostages was seriously injured," Cotta added. "So there is assault and battery. Two tough criminals. These two have been wanted for eight years! Their new identity, however, has made detection very difficult, so the search was abandoned six years ago."

"One thing I don't understand," Pete said. "Forged papers would have been enough. Why did they have to manipulate the computer records?"

"Think about it," Bob replied, "one stupid coincidence could have blown the whistle on everything. For example, someone does a check on their driver's licences and when their names are entered into the computer, it would have revealed that they had long since died."

The Second Investigator nodded. "But without this computer manipulation, we would never have caught them. So they set themselves up. At least they could have taken new photos, then we might not have found them out."

"They probably simply got the photos from their old records transferred to the Jones's," explained Cotta. "It's easier than scanning in new photos and loading it into the computer."

"I might be wrong but it is possible that deleting or creating new records are easier to detect compared to manipulating existing records," Bob added. "Look, they changed the photos and information on existing records but the date of the update fourteen years ago remained intact."

"Anyway, now we have the current address of both of them," Cotta said. "I'm going to notify the Chicago police. They'll handle it from there."

"Unfortunately, they're not there," Pete said. "We called their number in Chicago this morning. They're probably still in South America. Jupe might get into big trouble if he finds out about them and they realize that their camouflage has been blown. Who knows what they're capable of based on their past crimes! Jupe could be facing them all alone! Perhaps he's already in great danger at this moment!"

14. The Truth Comes Out

Jupiter's revelation echoed like a thunderclap in the room. The First Investigator watched the Jones couple closely. They stared at him stunned.

Catherine Jones got her act together first. "You can't be serious."

Jupiter was prepared for this reaction. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his ID. Without a word, he held it out to the two of them. Mr Jones took a good look at the ID.

"He's serious," he said. "That explains a lot." He shook his head. "My goodness, that explains everything! You're not on a vacation trip. You... you were after us, weren't you? But not because of the diamonds. You had no idea about them at all."

Jupiter nodded. "I'm here to find out if you're my parents." Now it was said. He felt himself trembling as he waited for the answer.

"That California guy, Sebastian sent you, didn't he?" asked Mrs Jones. "That had to happen sooner or later."

"He didn't send me. He just told me that he met you here. That's when I decided to come here."

"And you're actually the son of Catherine and Julius Jones?" Mrs Jones laughed with a roar. "You flew from California to Venezuela to find your parents? This is too crazy!"

Jupiter was confused. "What's crazy about that?"

"That we were afraid of being discovered for years," she explained, "and now someone has actually come onto our trail. But not the damn police or customs, but a boy who thinks we're his parents."

"Are you?" Jupiter nervously rubbed his hands against the jeans.

"No. The real Julius and Catherine Jones have been dead for many years," the woman said. "... At least that's what we know from the computer records."

Jupiter had been looking forward to this moment for days. But now the truth came to light and he did not even have time to let it have an effect on him. The magical moment passed and Jupiter felt as confused as before. "But how... how did you get my parents' names?"

"You'd like to know?" the man replied with a smile.

His wife said to him, "I think he has a right to know."

"Are you crazy? We can't tell him everything!"

"Does it make a difference now?" she asked. "He already knows too much." She turned to Jupiter. "For some reason that I would not elaborate, we needed to change our identities."

"But how? And why my parents' names?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Coincidence. I'm a computer expert.

"Many years ago, I was working on a new computer security system for the police. I installed a back door to have access to the system if necessary. And a few years later, I actually needed that back door. We were being followed, so we had to get new identities. I was looking for two married people who had died not so long ago and at least looked a bit like us. While browsing the files I came across Catherine and Julius Jones. I changed their photos to ours and let them live on... at least on the computer system. After all, I had no idea

that one day a relative of theirs would show up. Or even her son. Did you really think we were your parents?"

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "Not really. And somehow, I don't know. I think I'm glad you're not. What are your real names? I'd hate to keep calling you Mr and Mrs Jones."

She suggested a slight bow. "Wendy Fletcher," she said, then pointed to her partner, "And my husband, Richard."

"And the photo in the wallet, who's the boy?"

"Did you think that was you?" She laughed again. "That's my nephew."

"You can't tell him everything, Wendy!" hissed Richard.

"Why not? We have to get rid of him anyway."

Jupiter twitched. "What do you want to do with me?"

"We'll think of something nice."

Jupiter panicked. He couldn't imagine that they'd really do anything to him. But he didn't want to take the chance. Hectically, he looked around for an escape route.

"The door is locked, remember?" Richard Fletcher asked grinning as he noticed Jupiter's gaze.

"That's right. And you have the key." Suddenly, Jupiter rushed forward and rammed his shoulder into Mr Fletcher's stomach. He let off a loud wheeze and staggered back a few steps, stumbled into his wife, and both of them fell onto the bed. Jupiter tried to reach into Richard's trousers pocket to get the key. Richard grabbed his wrist and held it with an iron grip. Jupiter bit his opponent's hand with all his might.

Richard screamed and ripped his hand up. Jupiter quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out the key. He jumped up, ran to the door and tried to open it with trembling fingers.

"Not like that," Wendy Fletcher shouted.

A second later, something crashed down on Jupiter's head.

He felt a sharp pain and suddenly everything was dark.

15. Family Trip

"I've always known," sobbed Aunt Mathilda, "someday something will happen to my boy while he's playing detective."

"Why didn't he talk to us?" Uncle Titus blamed himself. "We could have stopped him from going to South America."

Bob and Pete sat restlessly in the Jones's living room. They had delivered the latest news to the two of them and now did not know how to react.

"If only we could help him," Aunt Mathilda cried.

"We can do that," Pete said, happy to finally get to the real reason for their visit. "We must go to Venezuela—as quickly as possible!"

Bob nodded eagerly. "We've already spoken to our parents. They're not exactly enthusiastic about our plan. We've been away before, but never under such circumstances. They're naturally afraid something will happen to us if we run straight into the hands of those violent criminals."

"But you said you didn't have any money," Aunt Mathilda threw in.

"That's only partly true," Bob explained. "I saved some of the money I earned at Sax Sendler to go on a vacation with Elizabeth. I'll just have to postpone it. She'll understand."

"And I can sell my new bike," said Pete. "I didn't need it that bad."

"But... but you can't!" Aunt Mathilda cried.

"Mrs Jones," Bob interrupted her. "We have no time to lose. There's a flight to Caracas tonight. The bags are packed, the money is there, there is only one thing missing and that is why we are here."

"What's that?" Uncle Titus asked.

"You have to put in a good word for us with our parents," Bob explained. "Perhaps you can convince them that we need to go to Venezuela urgently to help Jupe."

"But can't we just call the police in that village?" Aunt Mathilda thought.

Pete laughed. "We don't even know whether there is a police station in Suerte, let alone how to contact them. And even if we managed to do that, I don't think my Spanish is enough to make a Venezuelan understand the whole story. No, we have to go to South America today. Please, talk to our parents!"

Aunt Mathilda frowned. She looked at her husband. "Titus, would you come with me, please?"

"What is it?"

"Come on!" They left the room.

"What is it now?" Pete asked. "Are they calling our parents now?"

Bob looked at his watch. "Whatever they are doing, they should hurry. The plane leaves in a few hours. Until then, I have a hundred things to do. Like call Lys. After all, she needs to know. And Elizabeth. Man, she's gonna be angry."

"Not just them." Pete was thinking about his girlfriend Kelly. She was prone to hysteria anyway. If he told her that he was flying to South America today, she'd freak out. She would reproach him once again that his friends were more important to him than she was. But what would he do if Jupe was in serious danger? Spend the holidays calmly with her?

Pete looked at his watch. It had been ten minutes since the two left the room. "Where are they?"

"My mother's a hard person to persuade," Bob said. "This may take a while."

Pete walked restlessly up and down the room.

Bob laughed. "Now you're acting like Aunt Mathilda three days ago. She almost walked through the floor, too."

"That's what tugs my nerves," Pete defended himself. "I just have to move."

"You'd love to jog a few miles now to clear your head through, wouldn't you?" Bob said.

"No. I'd love to go to the airport and fly off."

Another fifteen minutes passed before Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus came back. Both grinned broadly as they saw Bob and Pete's expectant faces. "We called your parents," Aunt Mathilda said.

"And? What did they say?" Pete asked excitedly.

"You may go."

Pete raised his fist up in the air excitedly. "Whoo! Thank you very much. How did you do that?"

Aunt Mathilda smiled confidently. "When Mathilda Jones sets her mind on doing something, she gets it done. After all, I want Jupe back safe and sound. And who'd better to do it than two experienced detectives like you!"

"Then we'd better get going," Bob suggested. "We've got some things to do."

"Wait! Not so fast!" Uncle Titus intervened. "There's a catch, though."

Bob stayed. "And what is that?"

"We're coming with you."

"What?" Pete cried, biting his lips. It shouldn't have sounded so shocked. "But..."

"No buts," Aunt Mathilda replied. "It was the only way to convince your parents that nothing bad could happen to you. We're your chaperones, so to speak." She laughed. "Don't worry, we won't get on your nerves. But after all, it's all about Jupe."

Then she got serious again. "He's more than our nephew. He's... he's our son. And if he hasn't found his real parents, he's gonna need us." Suddenly tears shimmered in her eyes.

Bob put his hand on her shoulder. "You're welcome to come with us," he said, smiling. "We have nothing against it."

Uncle Titus cleared his throat. "The plane leaves in four hours. By then we must have packed, booked a flight and watered the flowers. Mathilda, save your tears until we find Jupe." He smiled lovingly at her. "Let's go!"

"We have to go to Headquarters quickly. We left a note there with the exact address and directions," said Pete.

They left the house, crossed the salvage yard and entered the trailer. "This place is still in a mess," Pete moaned. "I'd forgotten all about it. Where's the note?" Both started digging in the mountain of paper.

"Found it!" Bob cried, waving a piece of paper. Then he frowned. "If Jupe comes back and sees this mess, he's gonna be pretty mad."

"Are you going to clean up now? We only have a few hours left," Pete quipped, trying to be funny.

Bob shook his head. "I can do better than that." With his foot, he pushed the file stacks to one side until the trap-door to Tunnel Two was uncovered. Then he opened the trap-door and threw the files into the dark hole. "This is where they are best kept."

16. Captured!

Jupiter's head hurt. He felt that even before he was really awake. The pain was so severe that he couldn't be dead yet. He tried to open his eyes. For some reason, he couldn't. Only after a few moments did he realize that his eyes had long been open, only that there was deep darkness around him.

He was lying on a cold stone floor. Jupiter tried to move, but his hands were tied behind his back. With difficulty, he succeeded in pushing himself forward. After a short time he hit his head against a wall. With great effort, he straightened up his upper body and leaned against it.

Then he paused and listened. Nothing was heard. He tried to put his thoughts in order. He had been hit on the head and passed out. How long ago did that happen? Where was he anyway?

When the throbbing in his head had subsided a little, he put his feet on the ground and tried to push himself up against the wall. He only succeeded on the third attempt.

When he finally stood, his head boomed more than before. He stood still for a few moments until he felt better, then he walked along the wall step by step, his feet carefully feeling for obstacles. Soon he found that he was in a completely bare room measuring about five by five metres. He could barely see a low wooden door on one side, but it was locked. Jupiter suspected that it was a basement. He was walking across the room slowly when his foot suddenly touched something lying on the floor. Startled, he backed up. Carefully, he used his leg to nudge the object. It was soft and long.

"There's someone else here!" Jupiter whispered in horror and dropped to his knees. He tried to touch the body, but that was hardly possible with his hands tied behind his back.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Wake up!" He listened. But he heard nothing but the throbbing of his own heart. There was not even a breath next to him. Jupiter moved away.

Was there a dead man next to him? Was this the basement where they put people away to let them die?

"Pull yourself together, Jupiter Jones," he murmured.

Carefully he sat down on the floor, turned a little and felt the body with his hands. First he only felt the clothes, then he touched an arm. It was warm. Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief. Whoever was lying there was alive.

Jupiter wandered once more around the room in search of a light switch, but he found nothing. He tried to step on the door and called for help. Nothing moved. He wasn't expecting it either. Richard and Wendy had him safely locked up in a place where no one could hear him.

The absolute darkness made him nervous. Again and again he walked along the wall in order not to lose the feeling for the room.

After he had made countless rounds, he heard a soft moan from the middle of the room. "Hello?" asked Jupiter. The moaning repeated itself. "Hello? Are you awake?"

"Jupiter?"

"J.J.! It's you! I almost thought so."

"Where... where are we? Can you turn on the lights?"

“No, I’m afraid I can’t find the light switch. But I can help you straighten up.” With all his combined strength, he succeeded in leaning J.J. against the wall. “What happened? How did you get here?”

J.J. moaned again. “If you tell me where this place is, perhaps I can answer the question.”

“I don’t know myself,” confessed Jupiter.

“I thought you’re a detective. Come up with something.”

“All right. I think Wendy and Richard suspected that you are working with me,” Jupiter said. “They looked for you, found you, hit you over the head, and then you woke up here.”

“Who are Wendy and Richard?” asked J.J., confused.

“You know them as Catherine and Julius... Well, you shouldn’t be calling them that now. So did I guess right?”

“Not quite. After you weren’t back for more than two hours, I went to room 108 and knocked to see if everything was okay,” J.J. said. “Mr Jones... Richard received me quite kindly. Only after I went into the room did I saw you lying motionless on the bed.

“A moment later, my head exploded. And now I’m here in some dark hole. I think you owe me another explanation.”

“All right. But while I’m talking, we can try to loosen our shackles. We’ll sit back to back.”

They slipped into a position that allowed them to get into each other’s shackles. The knots on the rope were stuck and while they were fiddling with it, Jupiter reported what had happened to him. Eventually his knot loosened. A short time later he had freed J.J. as well. Relieved, they rubbed their painful wrists.

“So what do we do now?” J.J. asked “We’ve got to get out of here somehow.”

“The door has no lock, but a bolt from the outside, as far as I could feel earlier. We’d have to break it. And we’re not gonna make it.”

“Why not?” asked J.J..

Jupiter stood up and felt his way to the door. He knocked on it. “The door sounds pretty thick. And the wood is still strong. We’d only get bruises if we threw ourselves at it like in a TV thriller. There’s got to be another way. Do you have anything on you?”

Jupiter heard J.J. tapping his pockets. “Just the hotel key, my glasses and my lighter.”

“Lighter? Why didn’t you say so?” Jupiter cried.

“Are you going to burn the door down?”

“No. But then at least we can look around.”

A little later it flashed yellow and a small flame lit the room.

“It’s good to see you again,” J.J. said with a grin. They inspected the room. It was as empty as Jupiter had imagined it to be. However, it was far higher than a normal basement room—the ceiling was about three metres above them. A wooden trap-door was set up there.

“Hey!” Jupiter cried in surprise. “Maybe we can get out from up there if the trap-door isn’t locked. Our prison guards probably didn’t think we could turn on the light and look around.”

The flame went out. “The lighter’s getting too hot,” said J.J. “And we’d better save on the light.”

“All right,” Jupe said. “Shall I put you on my shoulders? You can try opening the trap-door.”

“Shouldn’t you climb on my shoulders?” J.J. asked, “I’m the older one.”

“What does that have to do with age? I’m definitely the heavier one. All right, let’s not argue! Who knows how much time we have left.”

J.J. sat on Jupe’s shoulders and was lifted up.

"Can you reach it?" Jupe asked.

"I can't feel anything yet, but... Yes, here's the trap-door. It's locked. Maybe I can push it up." As J.J. pressed his hands against the wood, Jupiter went to his knees. J.J. jumped off quickly.

"This isn't working," Jupe said. "I can carry you, but if you push yourself against the trap-door, I'll collapse."

"Let's try it the other way," J.J. suggested.

Jupiter climbed on his back, but even this attempt failed. "Turn on the lighter again," asked the First Investigator. "There's a metal ring up there. One of us could hang on to it. Maybe the trap-door will open inside."

"Good idea," J.J. said. "You're the heavier one. Perhaps you hang on to the metal ring."

They tried. Jupiter got his hands on the ring and J.J. ducked under him. Now the First Investigator hung with one hand under the hatch. The wood groaned, but nothing more happened. Jupiter let himself drop down.

"My weight is not enough. We both need to hang on. Where are the ropes they used to tie us up?"

J.J. lit the lighter again. "I have a hunch on what you're getting at. We pull the ropes through the ring and both of us hang on to it."

"Exactly. Let's try it!"

When they had prepared everything, they each took one end of the rope firmly in their hands and on command they brought their full weight to bear. There was a tremendous crash echoing through the basement room, and the hatch swung down.

A metal latch was torn from its anchor on one side of the trap-door. Pale light fell into the room.

"That was really loud," Jupiter said. "If anyone heard us, we don't have much time to get out. Come on. We'll make a robber ladder!"

J.J. clasped his hands and Jupiter put his foot in it. With momentum he was catapulted upwards. He got to grasp the edge of the opening and pulled himself up. Then he reached out his hand to J.J. and helped him up.

They were in a sparsely furnished building. A road was visible from one of the windows. It was dark outside. There was a door next to the window.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" Jupiter hissed and walked towards the door. He reached out and tried to open it, but it was locked.

At that moment, the light in the room came on.

"You stay where you are!"

Jupiter turned around and looked into the barrel of a revolver.

The revolver was in the hands of a small South American, whom Jupiter recognized by voice as Arturo. He came in from another door on the other side of the room. He took turns aiming his revolver at J.J. and Jupiter.

"That's what you thought, huh? How did you open the *trampilla* there?"

"It was very simple," Jupiter replied coolly. "Now, would you please let us go? You have nothing to do with this."

"But we do," said a voice from the next room. Wendy and Richard Fletcher came in.

"You almost succeeded," said Mrs Fletcher. "We have other plans for you, though."

"If you wanted to kill us, you could have done it yesterday," Jupiter said. "So what do you want from us?"

She came closer to them. "There's a flight from Canaima to Caracas late tomorrow morning. We'll leave at sunrise to get to Canaima in time. And you will come with us."

“Go with you?” J.J. asked in surprise. “Why?”

“So you wouldn’t get in our way,” Mr Fletcher replied. “We’ll abandon you on the way. You will need the whole day to get to Canaima or back to Suerte. We’ll be in the US by then. We’ll get rid of you without killing you.”

“It won’t do you any good,” Jupiter said. “You can forget about your smuggling business in the future. You will never be able to enter Venezuela again and your clean friend Arturo here will close his mine if the authorities find out that he has illegally got the diamonds abroad.”

“Nobody can prove that,” Arturo interfered.

Mrs Fletcher smiled. “Arturo is right about that. Suerte lies so deep in the province that no one will bother to monitor a small mine owner. Here in Venezuela the clocks tick a little differently. As for us, the next time we’re here, we’ll use another identity. And this time we’ll make sure that there are no relatives who can get in our way.”

Jupiter was silent. He had no cards left to play. If they managed to reach Canaima, they would have won. And Jupiter didn’t know how to prevent it.

Arturo tied the First Investigator and J.J. up and guarded them until dawn. He then gave the Fletchers a small parcel with the new goods and said goodbye. The couple put the two in the back seat of the off-road vehicle, got in and drove off. Jupiter had hoped to draw someone’s attention to them, but the Diamond City was still sleeping. He didn’t dare to call for help because Mrs Fletcher was pointing a gun at him. When they left Suerte, that chance was wasted.

The journey through the jungle was silent. The First Investigator thought very hard about how to stop the smugglers—with no result. From time to time he took a look at J.J. But he made an equally helpless face. This time they couldn’t even free themselves from their shackles. He stared out of the window in darkness and saw the trees swinging by on the bumpy ride.

Suddenly a car came towards them. Mr Fletcher turned to the right so that both cars could drive past each other. “Looks like we’re not alone,” he remarked.

17. Jungle Chase

“Looks like we’re not alone,” Uncle Titus said, pointing to the vehicle coming towards them. “Fortunately, the road here is wide enough.”

“Aunt Mathilda, who was sitting next to him, asked. “I hope we get there soon. I can’t stand this trip anymore. I hope we find Jupe in the village. What’s it called?”

“Suerte,” said Bob from the back seat. He yawned. They had been on the road since last night and hadn’t slept a moment. He could not enjoy the beautiful landscape around him because he was much too tired. And a small part of him who was still awake was worried about the First Investigator.

Uncle Titus drove the car slowly past the other vehicle.

“Hopefully he’s in the guesthouse,” Bob continued. “Otherwise, I don’t know where we’ll...”

“Hey!” Pete shouted suddenly. “Isn’t that... That was Jupe!”

“What? Where?” Bob was wide awake again.

“In the car!” Pete shouted. “Jupe was in the back seat! I’m very sure!”

“Titus, turn around!” Aunt Mathilda shouted. “Quick!”

Uncle Titus stopped the car and tried to turn around. But the road had become so narrow again that it didn’t get far. Trees and bushes prevented him from turning the vehicle completely. “It doesn’t work that way. I have to go backwards!” He steered the car straight again and engaged reverse gear. “Bob, Pete, you’re my eyes!”

They peered through the rear window onto the path behind them. The other car had almost disappeared behind the trees.

“A little to the right,” Pete shouted. “Careful, pothole!”

Uncle Titus reached the broad part of the road and he managed to turn the car. He stepped on it.

“Come on, the car’s already gone!” Aunt Mathilda shouted. “What was Jupe doing in that car?”

The front car came into sight again. Uncle Titus sounded the horn. But instead of slowing down, it accelerated.

“They’re fleeing from us,” Bob said. “So Jupe isn’t there on his own free will.”

“Faster, Mr Jones, or we’ll lose him,” Pete spurred him on.

“If I go any faster, the car might crash onto something. Besides, we can’t lose them. There’s no turn-off for miles ahead. This road leads to Canaima and nowhere else.” He raced over a thick branch on the way. The car jumped in the air and the occupants were again shaken rudely.

“Be more careful!” Aunt Mathilda shouted and rubbed her aching head.

“What now? Should I be faster or more careful?” Uncle Titus asked irritably.

“We can’t damage the car, else we’ll have no way of catching up,” Aunt Mathilda said.

“There!” Bob shouted and pointed forward. “The car stopped! They are letting someone out!”

“And now it is moving on,” Pete added.

Uncle Titus reduced his speed as they got closer. "It's Jupe!" he shouted and stepped on the brake. "There's someone else with him!"

Everyone jumped out of the car.

"Jupe!" Aunt Mathilda ran up to him and embraced him. "Are you all right? Oh, Jupe!"

"Aunt Mathilda! Uncle Titus! Pete! Bob! What are you doing here?"

Now the others also approached and embraced him.

"Free us from our shackles," groaned Jupiter, who could not defend himself against the embraces. Pete pulled out his pocket knife and cut the rope for both Jupe and J.J.

"I didn't think we'd find you so fast," Uncle Titus said. "Were you in danger?"

"I found out all about the wrong Jones couple," Jupe said.

"What were you doing in that car, anyway?" Pete asked.

The First Investigator raised his hands defensively. "I'll explain everything later—and hopefully you'll explain something to me too—but first we have to go after that car!"

"After that car?" Aunt Mathilda asked. "But why?"

"Don't ask, get in the car!" Jupe cried. "We have no time to lose."

The tall, slim boy, who had kept himself in the background, now stepped forward one step and asked timidly: "Is there still room in the car? I don't like to walk anymore."

"This is J.J.," Jupiter said curtly. "Luckily, he's so slim. But let's go!"

Everybody got back in the car. Jupiter squeezed in front with J.J. while Aunt Mathilda, Pete and Bob sat in the back seat. Uncle Titus stepped on the gas and they resumed the pursuit. On the way they told each other briefly what they had experienced.

"You came at the perfect moment," Jupiter said relieved. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you in that car. I was beginning to think you hadn't spotted me. But when you drove behind us, the Fletchers decided to throw us out. That was the only way they could shake you off. They gained a few minutes from it."

"We'll catch them up easily," Uncle Titus replied and drove a little faster. The tension of the last days had suddenly fallen away from him. The task now was to catch up with the other car.

The car was gone. But it still had to be in front of them. After more than thirty minutes of exciting driving through streams, deep hollows and over fallen tree trunks they finally reached the extended road to Canaima. The last rain had softened it, but here driving was a real relief compared to the jungle trail.

They were only a few miles from the city when Jupiter said, "They can't escape us at all. Even if they had reached Canaima, the plane doesn't leave for another hour. We would have caught up by then."

"Maybe they're not taking the plane," Bob surmised.

"There's no easy way out of Canaima," J.J. interfered. "Except by plane."

"There they are!" Pete shouted suddenly.

Uncle Titus shook his head. "No, that car is coming towards us, they can't be."

Jupiter narrowed his eyes. "Yes, they are! They... They're driving straight at us! And they're getting faster!"

"They want to ram us!" Bob cried. "They know that they cannot escape from us!" The road was so narrow that two cars could only just pass each other. However, the oncoming off-road vehicle drove in the middle of the road. It was getting closer—and faster.

"Titus, stop!" Aunt Mathilda shouted. "Brakes!"

When the car was only twenty metres away, Uncle Titus stepped on the brakes. The wheels locked and it slipped on the muddy road further. Uncle Titus turned the wheel around. The car stood across, slipped sideways and hit a tree on the driver's side with a violent bang.

Glass splintered and the hood cracked. Then it was quiet. Only a soft hissing could be heard. The car in front stopped in time, turned around and slowly moved away.

Jupiter opened his eyes wide. He looked around. Glass was all over his lap. A splinter had pierced into his forearm. Apart from his bleeding arm, every part of his body seemed to be intact. Jupiter tried to open the passenger door. It was dented and could only be opened after he had thrown himself against it with his shoulder. Carefully, J.J. climbed out of the car followed by Jupiter. Then they took care of the others.

“Are you all right? Aunt Mathilda?”

She nodded dazed and gently pushed herself out of the car. Pete and Bob were shocked, but also climbed outside unharmed. Only Uncle Titus stayed in the car. He gritted his teeth together and stared at his left arm.

“Uncle Titus? Are you OK?” Jupe shouted.

“My arm,” he moaned. “It was in the way when the car tried to wrap itself around the tree.”

“Come on, we’ll help you out!” Together, they succeeded in freeing Uncle Titus.

His face contorted with pain. “I think my arm’s broken.”

“Does it hurt when I touch it?” Jupiter asked and gently tapped his forearm.

Uncle Titus screamed. “Yes! Don’t do that!”

“What are we going to do now?” Aunt Mathilda asked desperately. “A car never comes here in a lifetime.”

“We have to walk to Canaima,” Pete said. “We can get a doctor there.” He looked at his watch. “If their plane takes off in about an hour, maybe we can even stop the Fletchers.”

“Not likely.” Jupiter shook his head. “You can’t go fast on this road.”

“Maybe you can’t, but I can,” Pete replied. “I’m going to run all the way. Stay calm, you’re too slow for me anyway.”

“I’ll go with you,” said J.J. “One to look for a doctor, the other to the police.”

Pete looked at him doubtfully. “Can you make it all the way?”

J.J. grinned. “I’m more athletic than I look. What are you waiting for? We don’t have time to lose!”

The muddy road seemed to be sucking their feet. Every step was twice as strenuous as on a normal road. The unfamiliar climate was also a problem for the Second Investigator. Within a few minutes, his body seemed to have sweated out all the fluids. However, it was not much of a problem for J.J. Quietly and evenly he maintained his pace.

“How do you do that?” Pete gasped after they were on the road for half an hour.

“I walk twenty miles at home every weekend,” he explained. “That keeps me fit.”

Pete twisted his eyes. He wasn’t used to someone being faster or more persistent than him. J.J. was both.

Another half hour later, Pete’s lungs were on fire. His legs were heavy as lead. His whole body was now covered in clay. Annoying mosquitoes used it again and again as a runway. He stopped and put his hands on his thighs. “Stop!” he gasped. “I... can no longer catch up!”

J.J.’s exhaustion was also noticeable, but he didn’t seem as exhausted as Pete. “Can’t you make it?”

“We can’t make it!” Pete corrected. “If I’m correct, the plane took off ten minutes ago.”

“Did you see it or hear it?” asked J.J. “We’re so close to Canaima now. We should have heard it. Maybe there’s a delay.”

“Do you think so?”

“Come on, it’s only a while more. We’ll make it!” He ran on and Pete got up again, although he would have liked to fall into the mud and stay there for the next few hours.

Again and again they looked up to the sky for the plane that was to leave Canaima at any moment. When they reached the outskirts of the city, they put in a final sprint. Here the road was less muddy and they made better progress. People were staring, but they didn't care. They had to stop the plane!

When they reached the small airfield, the plane to Caracas was still on the tarmac.

"Stop!" Pete shouted and ran towards a man in uniform who apparently belonged to the airline. "Do not start! Uh... *¡No despegar!*"

The man stared at Pete as if he came from prehistoric times. Pete looked down at himself. He was covered in mud from top to bottom, with wet hair sticking to his head and a bright red face. J.J. also made an untrustworthy impression. "*¡No despegar!*" repeated Pete. That's all he was capable of saying.

J.J. saved the situation. In fluent Spanish he explained something to the man that Pete did not understand. The uniformed man listened patiently, then became very excited, asked questions and suddenly disappeared into the adjacent building.

"What... what did you tell him?" Pete gasped.

"Everything. He'll stop the plane."

The Second Investigator let himself fall to the ground moaning. "I'm gonna have to... train more."

"What, running?"

"No. Spanish."

18. Coincidence or Fate?

Titus Jones came out of the small doctor's office in Canaima smiling happily. A bright white plaster adorned his left forearm. "Broken," he said. "Twice. This will take a few weeks."

Aunt Mathilda hugged him. "I'm glad nothing worse happened."

"Now tell me what happened with those crooks!" Uncle Titus demanded.

"At J.J.'s urging, the police pulled the Fletchers out of the plane and searched them," Pete reported. "And they found the diamonds! They claimed that they did not want to leave the country, but just to fly to Caracas, but the police probed further on suspicion of smuggling. They then checked that had the Fletchers got to Caracas, they were to board a connecting flight to the US within two hours. That was enough to detain them."

"And the authorities have planned to contact their US counterparts. It will come out that the two of them have even more dirt on their hands," Bob continued. "Bank robbery, hostage-taking and forgery. That should put them behind bars for a long time."

"That's another case completed," Jupiter said with jubilation. "Not least thanks to J.J.'s help." He turned to the big boy. "I hereby pronounce you an honorary member of The Three Investigators!" He patted him on the back with appreciation.

Aunt Mathilda embraced all four of them at once. "I'm glad everything went well," she said with relief. "My goodness, that was exciting! I hope I don't have to go through this anymore." She turned to Jupiter. "And what about you? Are you disappointed that the Fletchers were crooks and not your parents?"

Jupiter sighed. "Actually, I'm glad. Who knows what would have changed had they really been my parents? Besides, I got you two." He held his aunt and uncle again with his arms before turning to Pete. "Why didn't the plane take off on time?"

The Second Investigator looked at him uncertainly. "The plane... had a leak in the fuel tank. The pilot noticed that just before the take-off."

Jupiter lowered his head, upset. "The plane would probably have crashed if the problem hadn't been noticed," he muttered. "Then Catherine and Julius Jones would have been killed a second time in a plane crash." He paused for a moment, and then continued: "This is definitely too many parallels to my own life. Is that coincidence or fate?"

In the evening they all sat in a small restaurant in Canaima. They had checked into a small hotel and spent the day giving their maltreated bodies some rest.

"I've thought of something," Aunt Mathilda began. "We need to stay here a few more days to get Jupe's stuff from Diamond City. And also to settle the matter with the damaged rental car. The flight cost us a lot of money. It would actually be a waste if we didn't take advantage of that and stayed a while longer. Titus and I haven't had a real vacation in ages. In addition, we have now closed our salvage yard temporarily. And you three, or four including J.J., are on vacation. What do you think of that?"

"Fantastic!" called Pete. "I'm beginning to realize that I'm really in Venezuela. The last two days have been so exciting that I haven't been able to enjoy it yet."

"I feel the same way too," Bob said. "I wouldn't mind staying here at all for a holiday."

“Let’s see how long the money will last,” Uncle Titus suggested. “What about you, J.J.?”

“I have to get back to Iowa soon,” he said. “But I’ll probably stay a few more days here to give you a bunch of travel tips.”

“Great!” Jupiter cried and raised his glass. “Let’s drink to it! To the happy ending of this adventure and the beginning of a new one!” Aunt Mathilda raised her hands defensively.

“Please don’t! My nerves can’t go through another adventure.”

“Aunt Mathilda,” Jupiter said reproachfully. “We’re in South America! You have no idea what else can happen to us here!”

The glasses clinked together.